

THIRD EDITION

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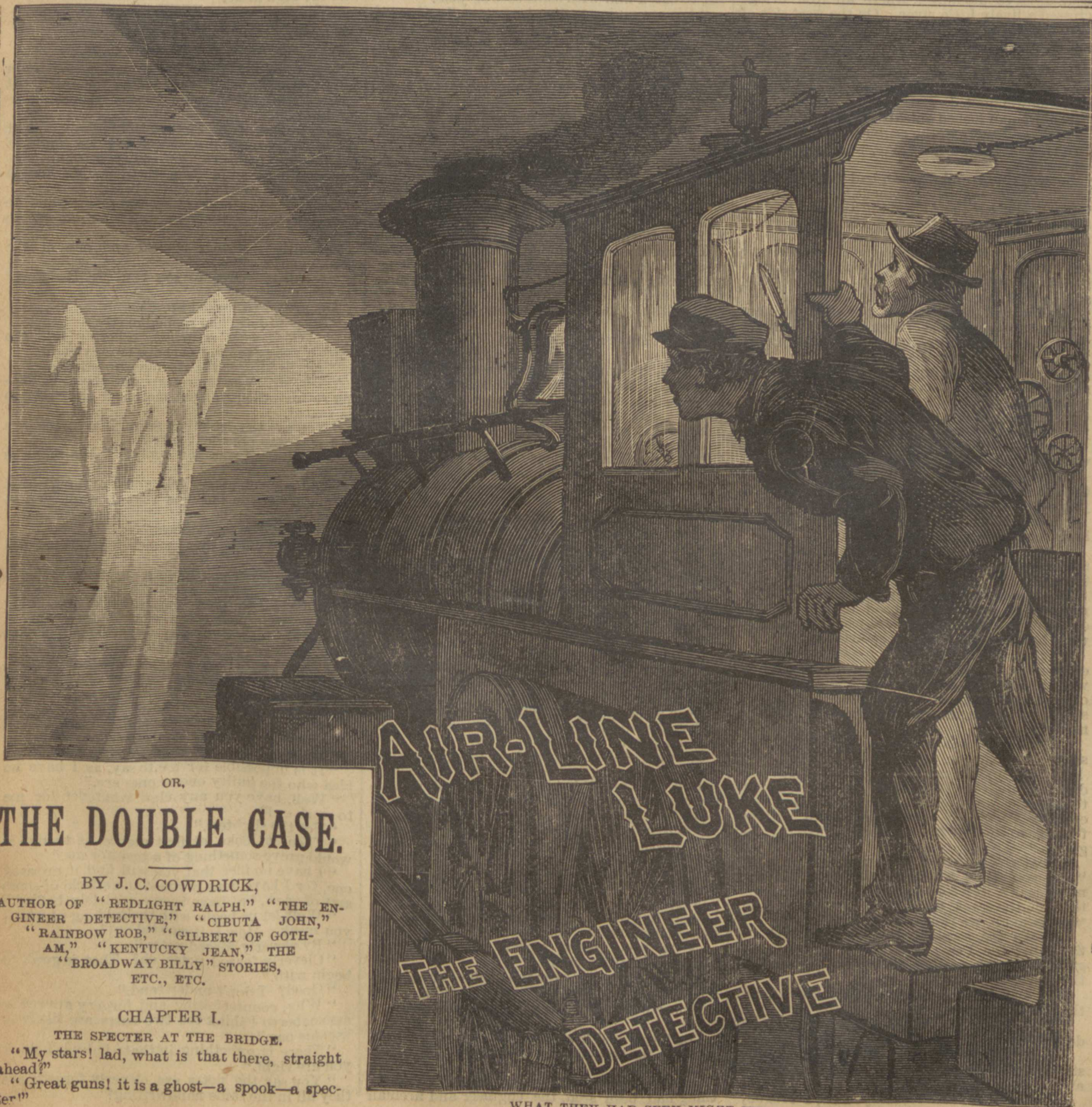
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OR,

THE DOUBLE CASE.

BY J. C. COWDRICK,

AUTHOR OF "REDLIGHT RALPH," "THE ENGINEER DETECTIVE," "CIBUTA JOHN," "RAINBOW ROB," "GILBERT OF GOTHAM," "KENTUCKY JEAN," THE "BROADWAY BILLY" STORIES, ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE SPECTER AT THE BRIDGE.

"My stars! lad, what is that there, straight ahead?"

"Great guns! it is a ghost—a spook—a specter!"

AIR-LINE LUKE

THE ENGINEER DETECTIVE

WHAT THEY HAD SEEN MIGHT WELL STARTLE ANY ONE.

"It sartainly is. Whoa, Maria; I reckon we'd better stop!"

It was night. A heavy freight-train was thundering along toward its destination, and the speakers were its engineer and fireman.

The engineer was Ben Howard, popularly known as "Doc" Howard; and the fireman was Luke Jackson, though he was far better known as "Air-Line Luke."

Luke's father had been an engineer on that road, and at the age of fifteen, Luke, being a rugged and hardy boy for one of his years, had begun his railroad career as fireman on his father's engine.

One night, shortly after starting out, his father was taken suddenly ill, and Luke ran the train safely through to its destination, and on time, too. And that won for him his sobriquet, by which he was almost always accosted.

His father was now dead, and another engineer held his place on the Fast Line, but Luke was about to be promoted to an engine. In fact, this was to be his last trip over the road as a fireman. On the next night he was to run out the Express Freight east.

This night the train was the Express Freight west; the road was the B. L. & H., in one of the Western States, and the scene a point about half way between the terminal stations of the road, near a large mountain where an iron bridge crossed a lively little river. On the west side of this mountain was a big fill, where were the river and the bridge.

The Freight was going down the mountain grade at a lively speed, and was just nearing the bridge, when the engineer broke out with the exclamation quoted.

The fireman looked quickly in the direction indicated, and there in the center of the track, on the other side of the bridge, was seen a faint bluish light.

Both engineer and fireman had their heads out of their windows in a moment, and with his "whoa, Maria!" the driver whistled for brakes, shut off steam, and reversed his engine, all in the shortest possible space of time.

What they had seen might well startle any one. As they approached the bluish light a figure in white rose up out of it, and, with uplifted arms, awaited the coming on of the train.

Doc Howard did all in his power to stop, but the distance was too short, and, in another moment, the engine was right upon the hideous object and it was under the wheels.

"I guess the stuffing is knocked out of that ghost!" observed Luke, as he jumped down to the tender to look back after it.

"I shouldn't feel more'n a heap surprised if you was right, sonny," responded the engineer. "Anyhow, we'll soon be stopped, an' then we will go back and see what is left of it."

In a reasonable distance the train was brought to a stand. Then the engineer and fireman jumped down and ran to the rear.

"What is ter pay now?" called out the head brakeman, as the two ran past.

"Somethin' run over," answered Luke, and the brakeman was down in a moment to join them.

In a moment more they met the conductor running up toward the head to find out the cause of the sudden stop, and when he was told what had happened, he, too, started back.

When they all reached the point where the engineer had seen the specter, however, nothing was to be found. There was not a sign or mark of any kind to show that anything had been struck by the engine, and the whole thing was a mystery.

"I reckon it was a sure-enough spook," observed the engineer.

"I reckon you imagined it," retorted the conductor, "and the best thing you can do now is to get onto your machine again as soon as you can and go on. We are late enough, without fooling around here any longer looking for ghosts."

"That's all right," the engineer growled, "but you don't want to think that I would make such a stop for nothing. There was something on the track, and that I'll swear to. And, what is more, we ran right over it."

"That's the straight truth," supported the fireman, "for I saw it too; and if it wasn't a ghost it was his brother, as sure as Moses was in the bulrushes."

Doc and Luke returned to their engine, and the train started on.

"Well, Luke," the engineer questioned, "what do you think of this adventure?"

"I hardly know," was the reply. "It is strange and no mistake. What do you think about it?"

"Just about the same that you do, I reckon,"

was the return. "I have had some queer experiences during my twenty years at the throttle, but this is the strangest one I ever met with. I would like to know what it all means. Perhaps old Doc is going to be called hence, and this is a warning."

"Nonsense!" cried Air-Line Luke; "I don't believe in such signs. It is all superstition that attaches any importance to apparitions and specters."

"Well, we won't stop to argy the thing here, lad. But I think I could convince you that there is a heap more in such things than you are aware of."

The train rolled on, and in due time came to the town of West Plain, where it met and passed the Express Freight east.

This was the train that Air-line Luke was to run out on the next night. It was, in fact, the same train he was on now, as Doc Howard was to take hold of a passenger train.

When they stopped at this station, the engineers and firemen usually exchanged a few words of greeting, and on this occasion Howard and Air-Line Luke had something of more than passing interest to relate.

"What kind of a story is this you are trying to give us?" demanded the driver of the east-bound train, thinking that the others were trying to catch him with some sort of joke.

"We are giving you a ghost-story," answered Luke, "and one of the genuine kind. You may see it yourselves before you are much older."

"And where did you say you saw it?"

"On the grade just this side of the Warland River, not far from the bridge," explained Howard.

"Well, I'll keep an eye peeled for it, and if I see it you can bet that I will find out what it is."

"Then you'll do better than we could," declared Doc and Luke, and so they parted, and while Doc and Luke went on to their destination, Marysville, the other train pulled out from the side-track, and continued on its way to Princetown, the eastern terminus of the road.

The engineer and fireman of this train talked about what they had heard as they sped along, wondering whether there could be any truth in it, or whether Doc and Luke had been putting up a little joke upon them, or at least trying to.

"What do you think about it?" the fireman asked.

"Well," responded the engineer, "I thought at first that they were trying to send us off on a blind switch, but the more I think about it the more I think there is something in it. I have heard tell of such sights being seen just before some great accident, and it may be that something of that kind is about to come."

"I hope not, goodness knows!"

"Same here, my boy!" declared the engineer; "but we are getting near to the place now, and maybe we will see something of it ourselves."

When they crossed the top of the hill and turned down toward the river, both men kept a sharp lookout ahead, but for some moments they saw nothing.

When they came near to the bridge, however, there suddenly appeared a faint bluish light in the center of the track ahead, and then they knew what to expect.

"There it is!" cried the fireman.

"Keep your eye peeled now," admonished the engineer, "and we may be able to find out more than the others did about it."

Even as he spoke, the engineer shut off steam and slackened his speed, and in a moment more the bluish light was right at hand.

The eyes of the two men were bulging out like white door-knobs, and their hearts were beating wildly, but they did not for an instant remove their gaze from the shining rails.

And at that instant the specter appeared.

Up it came, a hideous figure in white, with arms outstretched and waving, as though warning the train to stop.

This was a little more than the engineer could stand, and with a wild, sharp whistle for brakes he reversed his engine and did the best he could to stop, but the distance was now too short, and in a moment more the horrible thing, whatever it was, passed under the wheels and disappeared from sight.

The train ran on over the bridge before coming to a full stop, but, as soon as it did stop, the engineer whistled to back up, and proceeded to do so.

Conductor and brakemen all wondered what could be the trouble, and all were quickly out to learn.

As soon as the place was reached where the thing had been seen, the engineer and fireman

sprung down to look for some signs of it, but nothing could be discovered. In this respect they were no better off than Doc Howard and Air-Line Luke had been.

It was a mystery that they were not able to solve.

The conductor and the brakemen laughed at the idea, at first, but, when told that the same thing had been seen by the Freight going west, they grew more serious over the matter.

The train moved on again, and, as these men were no wiser than those who had seen it first, the mysterious affair left on all a painful sense of some impending trouble or calamity.

It did not take long for the story to get around, and by noon next day it was known from one end of the road to the other that a road apparition had been seen near the Warland River bridge.

Of course many laughed at the idea of a specter, but others, who were more or less superstitious took it very much to heart. What did it all mean? Was some terrible accident about to happen?

"That, finally, was the question which every man on the line asked himself; for, superstition or no superstition, the presence there of the specter aroused that sense of the supernatural which lies down deep in every nature—in the low born and the high alike."

CHAPTER II.

A RATHER PECULIAR CASE.

THE town of West Plain was larger than might be supposed, to judge it by its name. It was a little city of some twenty thousand inhabitants.

In the office of the First National Bank of that place, on the morning succeeding the night of the events recorded, an old gentleman was seated at a table in deep thought—Mr. Joseph Redding, the president of the bank.

His face wore a troubled expression, and he seemed to be anxiously waiting for some one to come.

Presently the door opened and one of the bank's clerks came in.

"A caller desires to see you, Mr. Redding," he announced.

The president looked up.

"Show him in!" he replied curtly.

The clerk soon returned, ushering into the office a young man of perhaps twenty-eight.

"Mr. Redding?" the stranger questioned.

"Yes, sir," was the return, and the clerk having retired, the president motioned the caller to be seated.

"You are the detective from Marysville, are you not?" the president asked.

"I am, sir," was the reply. "My name is Wilson Hooper."

"Did your employer tell you anything about the nature of the business that I want you to undertake?"

"None of the particulars."

"Then he did tell you something? What did he say?"

"Simply that you have a suspicion that you are being robbed."

"Then I will post you, so that you may clearly comprehend the work before you. I am being robbed in a systematic manner, but have no idea who the thief can be. And, not only that, but of late I have found that there is a great deal of counterfeit money afloat in this part of the country, and it is a clever imitation of the money of this bank."

"Then it is in the nature of a double case, I infer, unless the same parties are concerned in both crimes. Do you think that can be so?"

"It is impossible for me to say, as I have no idea who the guilty one or ones are."

"Well, have you any clew whatever for me to work on?"

"Not the slightest."

"Then it looks, at first glance, as though it would prove something of a task for me."

"I have no idea that you will find it an easy one, for I have done my best to get hold of some sort of clew, but have been completely baffled."

"Well, let us begin with the robbing of which you speak. How is it carried on?"

"By cleverly forged notes."

"Cleverly forged notes, eh? That is good, to begin with."

"Good? I don't understand."

"Why, counterfeiting and forgery are ready associates so I think the two cases are likely to become one."

"There is something in that; indeed, I think you are right."

"You say the notes are cleverly forged: are they all in the same handwriting?"

"No; they have come to us in several different hands."

"And the signatures?"

"They are faultless, and the names of the best business men in our city."

"Has the cashier not been able to detect them at sight, when presented?"

"No, not as yet, though he now scrutinizes every signature with excessive caution."

"How many cases of this kind have you found?"

"Eleven."

"Great Scott! you allowed them to fool you that many times before you made the discovery?"

"It could not very well be helped. You see, all the notes came due within a few days of each other, and as soon as we found that two of them were forgeries we looked up the others to learn how many of them were bad."

"How much is your total loss, in this way?"

"About twenty-five thousand dollars."

"Whew! that is no small sum for your little bank, is it?"

"It is pretty hard on us."

"And to whom was all this money paid?"

"To a man who had been buying up real estate in this county."

"Then you have a chance to get some of it back, certainly."

"Get some of it back? Not much! the scoundrel has been too sharp for that. He dealt considerably in real estate, as I said, but when we came to look up the matter to see how he did stand, we found that all he owns here will not reach over two thousand dollars. He bought land of several of our rich men, but, by trading and what not he cleared his hands of almost all of it, at a good round profit. This done, and before the notes became due he dropped right out from among us, and that was the last of him."

"What was his name?"

"He called himself Herbert Spencer."

"Can you describe him?"

The president of the bank did so to the best of his ability, and then the conversation turned upon the question of counterfeiting.

"Will you now show me samples of this counterfeit money, with the genuine?"

Opening a drawer the banker took out some new bills.

"Here they are; see if you can tell which the genuine ones are."

The bills were twos and fives.

Taking them in his hands the detective studied them with care for a few moments, and then he picked out the ones which he thought were the genuine.

"Am I right?" he asked.

"You are," the president admitted.

"The signature is nearly the same on them all," the detective observed, "and is a very clever forgery. This gives strength to my suspicion that the counterfeiter and the note-forgers are one and the same. It is the engraving that gives it away."

"That is so," the president had to admit, "for I am sure that I would not be able to swear that the signature is not mine."

"Well, how long is it since you discovered these counterfeits?"

"About a week."

"And who was the first one to discover them?"

"One of our under-clerks."

"The paying-teller?"

"No; one of the lower men. He found two of them in his month's pay, and at once called my attention to them. Our paying-teller, by the way, is also our cashier."

"All the more strange, then, that he was not the one to make the discovery. But that does not matter, now. Have you any idea how much of this stuff you have accepted as genuine?"

"Not to a certainty, but we have traced at least four thousand dollars of it."

"It is a remarkable case, and no mistake. With your permission, I will keep these two counterfeits, and will know them when I see them."

"You may do so."

"And now, please give me a list of the employees of the bank."

This was soon done.

"Do any of them know that I am here as a detective?"

"Not one of them, sir."

"That is good, and it will be well not to let them know."

"Then you suspect some one of them? If you do, you are mistaken. I trust them all as I would my own sons."

"It does not follow that I suspect them," the detective returned. "I have to suspect every man, for that matter, until I find the guilty one."

By the way again, have you put this case in the hands of your own house detectives?"

"Yes."

"And that, of course, is known."

"It is."

"And now about this Mr. Spencer: did you, personally, have any dealings with him in any way?"

"No, sir. Our cashier, however, made an exchange of property with him, and boasts that he got rather the better of the bargain."

"He did, eh? Then perhaps he can give me some points about him. I will try and make the acquaintance of your cashier. And now, Mr. Redding, let it be understood that I am an acquaintance of yours, and that I want to purchase some property in this city. The rest I will take care of."

"It shall be as you say."

"And let these matters of the notes and the counterfeiting rest for the present. I will be at work in a quiet way, and will let you know how I am getting along from time to time. It may take me some time to make progress of any moment, but I will do the best I can."

And the detective took his departure.

CHAPTER III.

PRETTY LUCY FIELDING.

In a pleasant little cottage not far from the railroad station at West Plain lived pretty Lucy Fielding—as pretty a girl as the city of West Plain could show, and had many admirers.

She was the daughter of one Dan Fielding, a conductor on the B. L. & H. Road, who, while by no means wealthy, owned his little house and lot, and lived in very comfortable style.

Lucy, as said, had many admirers, and among them were some of the wealthy young men of the place, and among these was Stewart Lyman, the cashier of the First National Bank, who was reputed to be quite well off in this world's goods.

Of these rich admirers, however, Lucy had no favored one. And her father was not a little opposed to her having anything to do with them at all. It was his idea that a girl never did well if she looked above her own station in life.

Perhaps Dan was right, and it would seem that Lucy thought pretty much the same as he did, for while she cared little or nothing for any of her rich suitors, she did bestow her affections in another direction.

And the one thus blessed was an humble fireman on the road, and none other than Luke Jackson—"Air-Line Luke."

Luke's home was at West Plain, though he had to live at Marysville and Princetown the greater part of the time, but when he was on the Marysville end of the road, he could run out home to West Plain when his train arrived on time.

He and Lucy had known each other since childhood, had been schoolmates, and had always had a strong liking for each other. And their liking had now ripened into love.

On the same morning of which the preceding chapter treats, Air-Line Luke set out from Marysville to go to West Plain, after first saying good-by to Ben Howard, who, as has been stated, had made his last run on the Freight, and whose place Luke was to fill on the next trip out.

And he was going there with a purpose in view. It was his intention to ask Lucy Fielding to become his wife, and to name a not-distant day for the happy event.

He knew the young lady so well that he had no thought of a refusal.

In the mean time, while he was on the road thither, there came another caller at the Fielding home.

And this one was Stewart Lyman, the bank cashier.

Dan Fielding was out on the road, and Lucy was at home alone. Lucy was Dan's only child, and, her mother being dead, she was his housekeeper. And she filled that position with wondrous credit to herself and immense satisfaction to her father.

It was quite early in the morning, and the cashier had an hour to himself before it would be time to open the bank.

Stewart Lyman was a man about thirty years of age, good-looking and gentlemanly in manners. And he was considered quite wealthy, as his father had been one of the heaviest stockholders in the bank, and had left his son a goodly portion.

The cashier rung the bell of the little cottage with an air of confidence, and when Lucy came to the door he greeted her with his most winning smile and pleasing words.

Lucy received him pleasantly and asked him to come in, at the same time informing him that her father was not at home, hinting that she supposed he had come to see him.

"No matter," said the cashier, "since I did not call to see your father but yourself."

"Me!" exclaimed Lucy in surprise.

"Yes, you."

They had entered the sitting-room, and Lucy had invited the caller to a seat.

"What 'an you want to see me for?" the girl asked, while at the same time she guessed what was coming.

"Can you not guess?" Stewart returned.

"I am not good at guessing," declared Lucy.

"Then I suppose I must make my business known, and I can assure you it gives me pleasure to do so. We have known each other for some years, Lucy, and ever since the days when we went to school together I have loved you. And now I want you to become my wife. I have—"

"Excuse me, Mr. Lyman," Lucy interrupted, "but since what you ask can never be, I hope you will drop the subject at once and for all time."

"What! do you mean to say that you will not marry me?" the cashier cried, in genuine surprise.

"That is what I do mean, Mr. Lyman; I can never marry you."

"And you spurn the offer I have made you?"

"I simply decline the honor."

"You do not know what you are doing."

"On the contrary I know perfectly well what I am doing," declared Lucy with a laugh.

"Do you not realize that I am rich and that I can give you a life of ease and comfort?"

"That matters nothing to me," Lucy returned. "I do not love you, and that is reason enough why I should not become your wife. Besides, my father would not approve of my marrying above my station in life."

"Above your station!" cried the cashier; "you are fit to become the wife of a prince."

"I am afraid you estimate me far above my value," declared the girl with another silvery laugh.

"No, I do not. And I hope you will consider this matter calmly and change your mind. I am determined that you shall be mine."

"It is folly for you to set your mind upon anything of the kind," said Lucy, "for you have my answer now. I will never marry you."

"Then you must have some other reason than the one you have named."

"The reasons I have given you ought to be all-sufficient. And now pray let us drop the subject."

"Lucy Fielding," the cashier said in a hard, determined tone, "listen to me: I swear that you shall become my wife, and that within a short time, too. I have set my heart upon having you, and have you I will. Think the thing over, and I will call again in a day or two for your final answer."

"It will be useless for you to do so, for my mind is made up and you have the only answer you will ever get."

The cashier's face was purple with rage, and he could hardly contain himself. To be thus refused where he had thought his offer would be accepted only too gladly, was a little more than he could stand. His was an evil temper, and it was to be wondered at that he could control it as well as he did.

"I will speak to your father," he said, as he rose to go, "and it is to be hoped that he will have more sense in the matter than you have shown."

Again did the girl laugh.

"If you will take the advice of one of such limited mental ability as myself," she retorted, "you will do nothing of the kind. You will find that he will agree with me entirely, and will uphold me."

"Well, whether he agrees with you or not, you shall be mine. And now I will go. You will see me again ere many days, and then I hope our interview will be more agreeable."

"It has been as agreeable as can be expected," said Lucy; "and as I here end the matter so far as I am concerned, I hope you will not call again upon the same errand. It will be unpleasant to have to go over it again."

"Girl, you do not know me, nor do you realize what it means for you when you refuse my honorable offer."

"Perhaps not, Mr. Lyman, but I think I know what I am doing. And I will bid you good-day."

They had moved to the door while exchanging the last words, and the cashier now took his leave, muttering threats as he walked away.

Lucy went back into the house with a sober,

though by no means sad, face. It was something that she had felt must come sooner or later, and she was glad it was over now, though she was pained to think she was the cause of giving pain to another.

The cashier had been gone but a few minutes when there came another ring at the bell.

"Who can it be this time?" Lucy thought, as she went to the door.

As soon as she opened the door, however, she uttered a glad cry of welcome to the person who stood there.

An that person was Air-Line Luke.

"Good-morning," he cried, cheerily, as he caught hold of the girl's hand. "You are looking as fresh as a rose. How are you?"

The greeting on the part of the girl was hearty, and Luke's invitation to enter was more cordial than that of the cashier had been only a few minutes before.

"Your father is out on the road, I suppose," remarked Luke, after the exchange of a kiss, which we will not mention.

"Yes," answered Lucy, "he is always on the road, it seems to me. I wish his ship of fortune would come in, so that he could give up work."

"That is the ship we are all waiting for, Lucy," said Luke, "but I am afraid it will be a long time coming. I do not want to wish your father any bad luck, but at the same time I am heartily glad that his ship has not come as yet."

"Oh! you do not mean that!"

"Yes, I do, and I will tell you why: I am no longer a fireman, Lucy, for to-night I am to go out as engineer of the Express Freight, and—"

"Oh! I am glad to hear that."

"I knew you would be, and I came here to tell you. And not only that, Lucy, but now I want to ask you to be my wife. I—"

Lucy began to laugh.

"I seem to be in demand this morning," she presently said. "This is the second offer I have had."

"What do you mean?" asked Luke in surprise.

"Why, Stewart Lyman asked me to marry him not half an hour ago."

"Stewart Lyman!" cried Luke, turning pale at the thought that perhaps he was too late.

"Yes."

"And—and—you told him—"

Lucy laughed more merrily than ever.

"What do you think I told him?" she asked teasingly.

"I cannot tell, Lucy; he is rich, and—"

"And that is all!" interrupted the girl. "I told him that I would not marry him. And now I suppose I must give you some sort of answer—to get rid of you."

"All my future depends upon you," declared Luke earnestly.

"Well, Luke, I have made up my mind that I can never marry—"

"Heavens! Lucy, do not tell me that!"

"Oh! but I must tell you. I have made up my mind that I can never marry—any one but you."

CHAPTER IV.

IN FRIGHTFUL DANGER.

"TOOT-TOOT!" and with Air-Line Luke at the throttle, the Express Freight pulled out of the yard at Marysville and started on its trip to Princetown, the eastern terminus of the road.

It was a clear and beautiful summer night, but quite dark, as there was no moon.

The heart of the young engineer throbbed with pride as the noble machine under his control forged ahead, and he was happy. Here he was, master of an engine, and Lucy Fielding had promised to marry him within the year! It seemed as if his cup of happiness was full.

He had spent the forenoon with Lucy, and their interview had been a most enjoyable one to both. At their parting, Lucy had promised to listen for the whistle of his engine that night, a signal having been agreed upon by which she might know that he was at the throttle.

Now he was speeding away toward West Plain, and anxious to reach there.

His fireman was a young man who had just been promoted from an inferior train, and one whom Luke liked. In fact, Luke had been the means of his being put on this train.

"Well, Harry," Luke observed, when they were clear of the city and rolling away along the line, "how do you like this?"

"It is better than the gravel train, even if it is night-work," was the fireman's reply.

"You are right it is!" cried Luke; "it is glorious!"

"It must be for you, there at the throttle," the fireman commented wistfully, "and I'll be glad when I get up to that point."

"And you will get here sooner or later," declared Luke, "if you attend well to your present calling. You do the right thing by me, and I will not fail to speak a good word for you whenever I can."

"Thank you for that, Luke, and you may be sure I will do so."

"By the way," said the young engineer, "I suppose you have heard of the ghost at the Warland River bridge, Harry?"

"Oh! yes; and I meant to ask you about it. What do you think of the story? Do you believe it?"

"Well, I should say so, as I have seen it myself."

"That's so; you was on th' run last night, wasn't you. Wonder if we'll see it again?"

"Hard to tell, but we may. Open the fire-box door a little."

So they talked on, and in due time, after making several other stops at various points, the train rolled into West Plain.

This was the point where the Express Freight west passed the Express Freight east, as noted in the first chapter, and when Luke pulled into the yard he saw that the other train had not arrived.

And as he ran down toward the station, and passed the house where his promised bride lived, the young engineer sounded the whistle-signal agreed upon, and sure enough a light appeared at a window and Lucy waved him an answer.

The freight west-bound having the right of way to this point, the one Air-Line Luke was on took the side-track at West Plain, and being once in out of the way, the young engineer pulled down through the yard to the station.

There he stopped his engine, and when the conductor came up from the rear end the two entered the telegraph office to learn how late the other train was.

Finding that it was about ten minutes behind time, they sat down to take things easy until it came.

While they were seated there in the office, enjoying a few minutes' chat, the operator sprang suddenly to his feet, his face as pale as death, and so frightened was he that for a moment he could not speak.

"What in wonders is the matter?" demanded Air-Line Luke.

With an effort the operator recovered sufficiently to gasp:

"Runaway engine coming east—no one aboard—just passed Clayton at lightning speed!"

In an instant every cheek blanched.

A few words will explain the situation. Clayton was a station about ten miles west from West Plain, the direction from which Air-Line Luke had just come. The runaway engine was rushing toward West Plain, and unless stopped would certainly come into collision with the over-due Express Freight coming in the opposite direction.

What was to be done? That was the thought that flashed through each mind instantly.

It was certainly a trying moment.

"Peter Jones!" exclaimed the conductor.

"What are we to do?"

"Heaven only knows," said Air-Line Luke, for the instant completely upset by the horror of the situation.

"We must run the engine off the track," the conductor quickly added, "or it will meet the Freight."

"And there is no place where we can run her off here," declared the operator, "without great danger to life and property."

"That is so," agreed Luke, "and there is no way of reaching the Express Freight now to warn her of the danger."

"No," agreed the operator, "for she has passed the last station."

Precious moments were slipping away, although barely ten seconds had yet elapsed since the first word of warning from the operator.

The lives of their comrades of the rail depended on those in the office at West Plain, but what could they do?

"That engine must be stopped here," declared the conductor, after a moment of thought, "if we have to make a collision right in front of this office to do it. Come!"

Out he ran, and the others after him.

The first man he saw was the fireman, and to him he said:

"Take a red-light and run up the track as fast and as far as you can and stop the Freight. Ask no questions, but go! And at the same time look out that you do not get run over by an engine that is coming east."

Without a word the fireman picked up a lantern and started.

Then the conductor turned to speak to Air-Line Luke.

It was his intention to throw a freight car out on the main track and let the runaway engine collide with it.

But Luke was not to be seen.

He instantly appeared, however, from behind the tank of his engine where he had stepped to cut it loose from the train, and then as he sprang up to the cab he called out:

"Open the switch and let me out!"

"Hold on!" shouted the conductor; "what are you going to do? I want to throw a car out on the main track."

"I have a better plan," declared Luke; "open the switch!"

"You don't mean to wreck your engine, do you?"

"No, no," shouted Luke, "nothing of the kind; but let me get out, or it will be too late."

The young engineer was already running ahead toward the switch, and seeing that he was determined in whatever plan he had, the conductor opened the switch and let him out.

And the moment he was out on the main track and the switch was set up behind him, the young engineer started backward in the very direction from which the runaway engine was coming.

"Great Peters!" cried the conductor, "he is running to certain death! What can he be thinking about?"

"Can it be that he hopes to reach Murphy's Siding in time to throw the switch and run the engine off there?" the operator suggested.

"Impossible!" the conductor cried. "That is three miles away, and if he is trying any such mad plan as that, he is running to his doom."

"Then what can be his idea?"

"Hang me if I can see!"

Whatever his plan was, Air-Line Luke was alone to carry it out. But he was clear headed, and could be trusted.

Backward he ran his engine, right into the face of the coming runaway, and it did seem like sheer madness.

With his steady hand upon the throttle, he looked over the tender in the direction he was going, keeping a sharp lookout for the coming engine and prepared to reverse at an instant's warning.

He was going at a lively speed at first, but, when he had got about a mile from the station he slowed up and came to a stop.

Not knowing whether the runaway had any headlight or not, he was afraid to run another foot for fear of meeting her.

As soon as he had brought his engine to a standstill, Luke listened for the runaway, and heard it coming at a terrific pace down the hill.

And then around a curve dashed the headlight, and the engine was upon him in a moment more.

Luke was thankful that the engine was coming toward him head-first, and with its headlight lighted, for this would enable him the better to measure his distance and calculate his speed in what he was about to do.

Waiting until the runaway was less than a quarter of a mile away from him, the young engineer then started his own engine ahead, and with whistle wide open and sending out a frightful and continuous shriek, ran for West Plain ahead of the runaway, increasing his speed with every turn of the wheels.

Now here was a "pretty state of things" for the young engineer. Ahead of him was the Express Freight, coming toward him, while in the rear the runaway was chasing him at frightful speed.

And what was his intention?

To one acquainted with railroad life, it must now be plainly seen what he meant to do, while to the uninitiated it would seem that he was in imminent danger of his life. And he was in a dangerous place, it is true; but if his plan did not fail he would win and save any damage being done.

On he sped, his whistle blowing and headlight flashing, and those at the station at West Plain, now understanding what he intended to do, watched the two headlights with intense interest.

In the mean time the Express Freight was coming from the opposite direction, but the fireman who had been sent out with the redlight had got out to a good distance, so there was but little danger of that train's running into anything. The danger lay with the two engines.

Down the grade they came, now seeming very

close together, and whatever was to be done must be done quickly or it would be too late. How was it to terminate?

CHAPTER V.

A HUMAN SKELETON.

AIR-LINE LUKE was now as cool as a man of steel.

He saw that he had calculated his distance well, and had every hope of being able to carry out his plan.

In running away from the oncoming engine he did not try to outrun it, but on the contrary allowed it to gain upon him.

And in a very short time it was not more than a length away.

Then the young engineer increased his speed a little and let it gain more slowly.

Soon then the runaway struck his engine, but with such slight force that the shock was scarcely perceptible, and then the young engineer shut off steam and reversed to bring both engines to a stop.

Running at such speed as they had been, the station of West Plain was now at hand, and as Air-Line Luke swept by with the two engines together, those on the platform gave him a hearty cheer.

But the danger was not yet over, for the Express Freight was lying only a short distance above the station, and unless Luke could stop there was a good chance for a collision.

The engineer of the Freight, however, did a wise thing at this point in the game, for as soon as he learned from the fireman who had flagged him what was the matter, he started to back his train.

Air-Line Luke was losing no time in his efforts to stop, for he fully realized the second danger.

As soon as his own engine was reversed he clambered back over the tank and on to the pilot of the runaway, and then making his way to the cab with all haste, shut off the steam.

This done, the game was in his own hands, and in a moment more the engines stopped.

But they were no sooner stopped than they began to run the other way, for his own engine was using steam.

This was to be expected, and Luke got back again to his own cab, and with both engines now under control, ran back to the station.

And then the cheer that greeted him was one of which he might well feel proud. All the men around the station and yard were on the platform, and as soon as he stopped, they were all eager to grasp his hand.

"You did that well," the conductor complimented, "and I am proud of you."

"I feel rather proud of it myself," Luke confessed.

And it was something that he might feel proud of. He had done a clever piece of work.

The operator ran at once into his office to report that everything was safe, and found that the dispatcher was calling him with all the vim he could command.

The operator answered, and the dispatcher said:

"Do you see that runaway engine?"

"She is here," the operator answered.

"How bad is the wreck?" was the next question.

"There is no wreck at all," said the operator; "Air-Line Luke stopped her without a scratch."

Explanation followed, and Luke received a great compliment from headquarters.

For his first trip with an engine of his own, he had made it a red-letter event in his railroad career.

When the excitement was all over the runaway engine was put away and taken care of, and the Freight pulled up to the station. And then the whole affair was gone over in detail among the men. The runaway had been standing on the main track at the next station west—Clayton—and the yard engine, in drilling out a train, had run into it with force enough to open the throttle and start her off. And then came the great scare, and only for Air-Line Luke there would undoubtedly have been a big wreck with, no doubt, loss of life.

"If you can do as well with that ghost down there at the Warland River bridge, my boy," said the engineer of the Freight west, as he turned to his engine, "you will do mighty well."

"Why, have you seen that thing again?" Luke demanded.

"Have I?" the engineer exclaimed; "I should say that I have. And I would like to know what it is and what it means."

"And so would I," said Luke. "If I have the pleasure of seeing it again I shall try and make its acquaintance."

"Well, I think you will have the chance, for the thing seems determined to show itself."

As soon as their work at West Plain was done, the signal was given to go on, and Air-Line Luke pulled the throttle and the train started.

Shortly after starting the conductor of the train and one of the brakemen came over to the engine. They wanted to see the ghost at the bridge.

The story of the ghost was now known from one end of the road to the other; and on every train that passed, all the trainmen were on the lookout to see it.

But it did not appear to every train. There were several who had watched for it in passing that point, but had failed to see anything of it.

"Well, Luke," was the conductor's greeting, "are you prepared for the spook to appear to you?"

"Yes, let it come," was the young engineer's response. "It seems to be a harmless sort of thing, and I guess I can stand seeing it once in a while."

"Do you believe in ghosts?"

"Not enough to spoil my sleep."

"What do you think it is then?"

"Give it up."

"Then you admit that it is something that you do not understand?"

"Oh! I admit that, of course; but that does not make me think that it is anything supernatural."

"Well, what is your honest opinion about it?"

"I think it is a trick of some kind, and that it will be found out before a great while."

"I can't say that I agree with you," declared the conductor. "I have seen some strange things in my time, and I rather do believe in apparitions. I know that I told Doc Howard on the last trip I thought he imagined it, but at the same time I felt mighty serious about it."

"Well, then, what do you think it is?" Luke asked.

"That I cannot say. I think, though, that it is a warning of some kind. I remember just before the big accident at Henderson last summer, there was a peculiar red light seen at the point where the accident happened, for several nights in succession."

"And could no one explain what it was?"

"No. It remains a mystery to this day. One thing is certain, however, it was never seen after the accident happened."

"Well," Luke commented, "I do not pretend to know anything about it, but I am no believer in such forewarnings or signs. If it is any such thing, I hope its intentions are good."

This created something of a laugh, and the subject was dropped for the present.

The train rolled on, and ere long it approached the place where the ghost had been seen.

"Now," said the young engineer, "prepare to see his Majesty."

"Do not make light of it," warned the conductor.

"He will make light of his own," retorted Luke playfully.

The face of the conductor was a study. His expression was one of fear and dread combined.

"Are you going to stop?" asked Harry the fireman.

"Nary a stop," declared Luke, "unless the conductor says so."

"No, you need not stop," the conductor quickly added.

"How would it do to take a crack at it with a revolver?" asked the brakeman, as he displayed a weapon.

"Try it if you want to," said Luke.

"All right. I believe I will."

"Say, the conductor suddenly suggested, 'how would it do to run down slow, and so get a better view of the thing than we can if we go fast?'"

"Just as you say," said Luke.

"Well, then, shut off and let her go slow."

The young engineer obeyed the instructions, and the speed of the train was lessened immediately.

A few minutes more and it came out of the woods at the top of the hill, and began to descend toward the bridge.

As the train descended the grade, the young engineer managed its speed well, and when half-way down, it was going but little faster than a man could walk.

And every eye was strained ahead to catch a glimpse of the expected thing of horror.

Presently the bluish light was seen, and then the excitement with those on board the engine, with perhaps the one exception of Air-Line Luke, was great.

As they approached the light it seemed to grow brighter and brighter, and then out of it rose the hideous specter.

"Great Peters!" gasped the conductor, "there it is!"

"Yes, that is the gentleman," calmly assented Luke.

As for the fireman, he could not utter a word, and the brakeman evidently forgot all about his intention to shoot at it.

"Why don't you shoot?" asked Luke, as he saw him standing with his revolver all ready.

"Forgot it," was the answer; "but I'll try it now."

There was only a moment more to spare, for the train was almost upon the spot now, so the brakeman raised his weapon and fired.

But, there was nothing to show that the bullet took effect.

The ghost stood still, and it was plain that the bullet had missed, or else the ghost was proof against such things.

A moment later it was right at the pilot of the engine; then it threw up its arms, as though inviting death, and the next instant it disappeared under the wheels.

And at the same instant came the most appalling sight of all.

Beneath the white robe or gown that clothed it were seen the bare and gleaming bones of a human skeleton.

"Go on!" cried the conductor, fairly chilled at the sight, "for the love of goodness go on! I will never run another train over this road until I am sure that evil thing is laid."

"It is certainly something of a mystery," declared Luke, "and it is enough to scare almost any one. I would give much to understand it."

The train went on, and reached its destination without any mishap of any sort. And other trains on the road that same night saw the specter, and there were others besides the conductor of the Express Freight who refused to go over the road again.

CHAPTER VI.

OLD FRIENDS MEET.

A WEEK passed by.

By this time the specter at the Warland River bridge was the talk of the whole line. Several of the more superstitious ones had left the road, and love nor money could hire any one to visit the place after dark.

Even the section-men, in broad daylight, avoided that part of the line, and would not stop their hand-cars within a quarter of a mile of the spot.

At first the officers of the road took but little notice of the matter, but when they found that their men were in earnest, and that there must be something in the story, they offered a reward to any one who would solve the mystery.

But no one seemed anxious to earn the reward. Most of those who had seen the horrible specter, had a wholesome dread of it, and those who had not seen it, seemed to take but little stock in the story, even though the evidence presented was irrefutable.

One morning, about a week after his promotion, Air-Line Luke entered the office of the superintendent of the road at Marysville.

"Ah! good-morning, Luke," the superintendent exclaimed; "you have just got around, eh? Didn't the dispatcher tell you that I wanted to see you to thank you in person for that piece of work you did at West Plain the other night?"

"Yes, sir," answered Luke, "he told me, but I thought that would keep. I am here for another purpose now."

"Well, young man, let me thank you for that first. It was a good bit of expert railroading, and an undertaking that required a great degree of courage. The company thanks you for it."

"Thank you, sir," said Luke, blushing like a school-boy.

"And now, what can I do for you?" the superintendent asked.

"I would like to be relieved from duty for a trip or two," the young engineer explained.

"Why, how is that?" the superintendent demanded; "you have been running only a few days."

"I know that, sir," Luke admitted; "but I want to try my hand at 'laying' the ghost at the Warland River bridge."

The superintendent laughed.

"So you, too, have the ghost on the brain, have you?" he said.

"You know very well that there is something wrong there," declared Luke, boldly, "for the story has too many supporters to be doubted. And I am one of its strongest supporters. I have seen the thing more than once, and a man

can generally trust his own eyes. I do not know what it is, but it is something."

"Now, Luke," said the superintendent, "see here: Don't you think that 'the thing' is simply the gleam or reflection of the headlight on some part of the bridge or rails?"

"No, sir," responded the young engineer, firmly: "I do not. I have seen it several times now, and given it close attention."

"Do you believe in ghosts?"

"No, sir."

"And you want to undertake to solve this mystery, do you?"

"Yes, sir."

"Do you propose to try it alone?"

"I do."

"Well, I believe I will let you try it. I cannot let you off until to-morrow, however, as I have no one to put in your place."

"That will do, for I guess the ghost has come to stay, and no doubt I shall find his Majesty at home when I call."

"What do you intend to do?"

"I shall go to the place and spend a night there."

"Good boy! You certainly have nerve, Luke, and I believe you will be able to solve the mystery. You can depend upon it that there is some trick about it, or else it is some freak of nature producing the thing that you have seen. It must be explained as some sort of natural phenomenon."

"You may be right, sir, and I hope that I shall be able to clear the thing up and rob it of its terrors."

"I hope you may."

"Well, then, you will let me off to-morrow night?"

"Yes, I will have it arranged so that you will not have to go out. Do you desire more than one night?"

"I can make use of two, I guess," answered Luke; "so you may as well let me off for a round trip while you are about it."

"We will call it two nights, then. No doubt you can spend one evening very agreeably at West Plain."

As the superintendent said this his eyes twinkled merrily, and Luke understood well enough what he was hinting at.

When he left the office he felt glad in knowing that his service in the crisis of the previous week was appreciated, and also that his request had been granted. And he made up his mind to lay that ghost if it was in the power of man to do it.

That night, while he was oiling his engine and getting ready to start out upon his run, a hand fell upon his shoulder.

Looking up quickly he found himself in the grasp of a stranger—a man of middle age with a heavy beard.

"Don't get frightened, mister," he said; "I am as harmless as a kitten. I only wanted to ask you if I could ride with you down to West Plain."

"Don't trouble yourself about my getting frightened," returned Luke, "for I am not one of the easily scared kind. And as for your riding down to West Plain with me, you can't. It is against the orders for any one to ride on the engine."

"Where is your conductor, then?" the man demanded.

"In the caboose," Luke answered, "but, unless you can show good reasons I don't think it will do you any good to see him. Who are you, anyhow?"

The man laughed. "Don't you know me Luke?" he asked, now speaking in a different tone.

"Hang me if I do," the young engineer acknowledged, as he took a nearer view of the stranger.

"Then my disguise must be about as perfect as it can be," the man observed.

"Not Wilson Hooper?" the young engineer exclaimed.

"Nobody else!" assured the detective, for he it was—the young man whom we introduced to the reader's notice in the second chapter, in his interview with the West Plain banker.

And here a few words of explanation.

Luke Jackson and Wilson Hooper had known each other for some years, and were quite good friends. On one occasion Luke had assisted the detective in a case he had on hand, and the detective had then promised him that if he could ever repay the obligation he would be glad to do so. And then some time later the detective had been able to render Luke a little favor, and so they were about even on that score, and were, as stated, good friends.

As soon as the detective made himself known,

the two shook hands warmly, and then Luke asked:

"Where are you going?"

"Well," was the answer, "I wanted to go down to West Plain, but as you do not allow any one to ride on your miserable old freight train, I suppose I will have to wait for a Passenger."

"No more of that, now," Luke admonished; "if you want to ride down with me you may do so."

"Thanks. How soon do you start?"

"In about ten minutes."

"Good! And you get to West Plain ahead of the Passenger that leaves here at nine, do you not?"

"Yes."

"Then I shall be very glad of the chance to go down with you."

"Get right up in the cab there, then, and as soon as I finish oiling around I will join you."

The detective did as requested, and in a few minutes the young engineer was with him.

"Well, what have you got on hand this time?" Luke asked, as he put down his long-nosed can in the corner of the cab and wiped his hands with a piece of waste.

"Rather a peculiar one this time," the detective answered. "I am afraid I have a big job on my hands."

"No use to ask you to take me into your confidence, I suppose," Luke hinted, with a grin.

"If I did not know you as well as I do there would be no use of your hinting at such a thing," was the detective's response, "but since I do know you, I will tell you something about it."

"Just as you will. You need have no doubts about me."

"I know that well enough."

At that moment the signal to start was given, Air-Line Luke pulled the throttle and the train started upon its journey.

No more was said until the train was out of the yard, and then the young engineer was the first to speak.

"Now," he said, "you can go ahead with your story, and no one can hear you but me."

"Well," said the detective, "there is a little trouble in the First National Bank at West Plain, and they have engaged me to sift the matter. It is a case of forgery and counterfeiting. Sort of a double case in one, as near as I have been able to figure."

"And what sort of success are you having with it?"

"Well, I cannot flatter myself very much over my success so far. It seems hard to get a starting point. I think I am on the right track at last, however, and I hope to learn something to-night."

"Wish I could take a hand in the game with you," observed Luke, "for I rather liked the excitement it afforded on that other occasion."

"I wish you could," responded the detective. "I should like to have you with me to-night. There are two men coming down from Marysville on the next passenger train, and I wanted to get to West Plain ahead of them so as to shadow them when they arrive."

"This will just help you out, then."

"Yes, nicely. I thought of you, and made up my mind that you would carry me down. It is lucky that I saw you the other day and learned that you had an engine of your own. I am glad to see you have won promotion, and now if there is anything that I can ever do for you in return for this favor, you have but to command me."

"Thank you. I may sometime have occasion to accept your offer."

CHAPTER VII.

VILLAINY AFOOT.

LEAVING the two friends rushing along over the road toward West Plain, let us return to the matter that was uppermost in the mind of Stewart Lyman, the cashier of the First National Bank of that place.

That matter was—his desire to win the hand of pretty Lucy Fielding.

A week had passed since his last call at the little cottage, and he had not attempted to see her.

On this day, shortly after the bank had closed, he once more made his way to her home.

When Lucy answered his ring at the bell she did not invite him to come in, but told him that her father was not at home.

"Pardon me, if I invite myself in," he said, as he crowded in; "I will wait until he comes, which cannot be long now, I presume."

This was true, as Lucy was looking for her father's coming at any minute, and his train was not often late getting in.

"Very well," said Lucy, as she closed the door, "please step into the parlor and sit down. I will inform him that you are here the moment he comes."

As she spoke she threw open the door of the parlor, and would have passed on to the sitting-room, but the man caught hold of her arm and drew her back.

"Stewart Lyman, let go of me instantly!" she commanded, her eyes snapping with fire.

"Do not get excited," was the response. "I do not intend to harm you, but I want to talk with you for a moment."

"Sir! remove your hand!" the girl ordered, and this time in a tone so determined that the man obeyed. "You coward!" was her cry, as she placed herself beyond his reach; "if my father were here he would throw you out of doors."

"If he could do it," retorted the cashier, hotly, letting his true nature be plainly seen.

"And in his absence," added the brave girl, "it is my duty to order you out. Go!" and she pointed to the door.

"Ha, ha, ha!" Lyman laughed, "you are quite a queen of tragedy. You would make a charming hit on the stage."

"Will you leave the house?" Lucy demanded.

"I will not," was the retort. "I came here to see you, and I intend that you shall hear what I have to say. If you attempt to retreat I will bring you back again as I did before."

If the cashier had been drinking his face did not show it, but his actions were certainly the actions of a drunken man or a villain.

And nothing was clearer than that he was the latter.

The girl made no response whatever, but stood still, trembling in every limb, and listening eagerly for her father's welcome step.

"I am determined that you shall be my wife," the cashier declared, "and I shall not stop at any means to attain that end. If you do not know when you are standing in your own light, and when you are refusing the chance of a lifetime, I will force you to understand it. By marrying me you will win a life of ease and luxury, and marry me you shall!"

"Never!" the girl cried. "I had rather die than become your wife. That would mean a life of misery. Not only you are a villain, Stewart Lyman, but you are a fool as well. How I despise and detest you!"

"You will understand me better some day," returned the rascal, complacently, "and then you will thank me for forcing you to marry me. You do not know your own mind, and I can forgive you for your rather harsh compliments."

"I know my own mind well enough to know that I shall never marry you," was the retort; "and as for being forced to do so, you had better be sparing of your threats. You seem suddenly to have lost your senses."

"More compliments, pretty one, but I can stand them. When you are my wife, and have learned to me—"

At that moment Dan Fielding entered the house by a rear door, whistling merrily, as was his way.

With a glad cry Lucy turned quickly and ran out to him, and the instant Dan saw her frightened face and excited manner he knew that something was wrong.

"What is the matter now, little girl!" he demanded.

"Matter enough!" exclaimed Lucy, in great excitement. "Stewart Lyman is in the hall there, and has insulted and threatened me; and if you love me you will throw him out into the street."

Dan Fielding's blood fairly boiled in an instant, and he strode forward, but at the same moment the cashier stepped into the room with an air of perfect ease and assurance.

"Before you resort to such harsh measures, Mr. Fielding," he said, "I hope you will hear what I have to say."

"I give you just one minute to say it," thundered Dan.

"Then I will try and make the most of the limited time," said the cashier, as a smile passed over his face. "In the first place, your daughter has painted a rather vivid picture in few words, and one that is not exactly true to the reality. She says that I have insulted her, because I have asked her to marry me."

"And you laid hands upon me," declared Lucy, "and vowed that I should marry you."

"I admit that I did take hold of her arm," owned the smooth-tongued rascal, "and it may

be that I did say that she should marry me; but can a man stand like a pillar of ice when he declares his love to the woman he loves? That was about all it was, Mr. Fielding, and now I want to ask you openly and honorably for your daughter's hand. You know that I am of good family, and that I am well-to-do, and—"

"Not another word," said Dan, sternly. "You cannot marry my daughter, and for the one sufficient reason that she is already engaged to another. It is not necessary to mention any other. As for the present situation, I take my daughter's word before yours, and now the quicker you get out of my house the better it will be for your bones."

The information that Lucy was already engaged, fairly staggered the bank cashier. His face paled, and for the moment he seemed powerless.

"Did you hear what I said?" demanded Dan.

"Pardon me," muttered the rascal, "I was not aware that your daughter was engaged. Had I known this I might have avoided the unpleasant scene of this moment. I cannot say that I am not greatly disappointed, for I am, and I do not really give up all hopes, but—"

"If you do not hear what I said," interrupted Dan, "I will repeat it. Leave my house, and never darken its door again."

"Do you mean that?" the cashier asked.

"I never say a thing unless I do mean it," was the quiet reply.

"Very well, Dan Fielding, I will go without further words, but you have made me your enemy from this hour."

"I care nothing for that," declared Dan; "and all that I ask of you is to keep away from me."

"That will be easy enough for me to do, and now I will bid you good-afternoon. Miss Fielding, I wish you joy."

With a bow the man left the house, but the look he cast at the girl as he did so went to prove that he wished her anything but happiness.

As soon as he had gone, Lucy told her father all that had taken place, and the expression of Dan's face as he listened boded ill for Stewart Lyman if he ever put himself in the way.

"Let the scoundrel keep away from me, if he wants to enjoy good health," he said. "And," he added, "it won't be well for him to fall into the hands of Air-Line Luke either."

"Should I tell Luke about it?" queried Lucy.

"You need not do so unless you want to," her father replied, "but I shall tell him, for I would not trust Stewart Lyman. There is no telling what he may do, and it will be well for Luke to look out for him. And you, too, have need to fear him. He is a man of little honor, as I have always thought."

"I have no fear of him, father, and I guess we have seen the last of him. I certainly hope so, anyhow."

And Stewart Lyman, as he walked away, muttered to himself some terrible threats against Lucy and her father, and also against her intended husband, whoever he might be, for he had not yet learned that it was Luke Jackson.

"She shall be mine at any cost," he vowed. "I will not be balked. And now as there is no hopes of winning her by fair means, I must resort to foul. I will have her in spite of them all. Ha, ha, ha! if they only knew me as well as they think they do they would tremble."

He walked on toward his home, but before he reached there he was overtaken by a man who evidently had something of importance to say to him. This was clear by the manner in which he stopped him.

This man was a rough-looking customer, none too well dressed, and had rather a villainous face.

"Well, Jake," said the cashier, "what is it?"

"I have somethin' ter say ter ye," the man explained, "an' it is somethin' that won't be werry agreeable news ter ye, nuther, I'm a-thinkin'."

"Is it important?"

"I reckon it are, boss."

"Well, let's step in here, and I will listen to what you have to say."

"Werry well. Anything thet suits you suits me."

The place indicated was a saloon, and the two passed around to a side-door and went in.

As they did so, the cashier looked around to make sure that he was not seen, for it was plain that he was not proud of the company he was in.

There happened to be but few in the room, and the pair went back to a rear table well in the shadow, and there sat down.

They did not notice that just behind the table,

and behind a row of boxes that stood there, was a ragged girl, apparently asleep. Such was the fact, and further mention will be made of her later on.

"Now," said the cashier, "I am ready to hear what you have to tell me."

"Werry well," responded the other man, "I am ready ter tell ye."

At the sound of this man's voice the little girl started up, and when she had glanced out for an instant she sunk back into her place pale and trembling.

"Ye see," continued the hard-looking man, "you are a leetle interested in that gal o' Dan Fieldin's, an' it has come ter my knowin' that she is goin' ter be married sooner er later."

The cashier was attentive at once, and could not disguise the interest he felt. Striving to show as little interest as possible, however, he said:

"I am aware of that."

"An' d'ye know who she is goin' ter hitch with?" the other asked.

CHAPTER VIII.

SOME WICKED PLOTTING.

LYMAN's attempt to appear disinterested was now worse than useless, and he gave it up, while the other man laughed.

"No," the cashier admitted, "I do not."

"Well, I do."

"And who is it?"

"Give a guess at it an' see how fur off ye'll come."

"Oh! I am no good at guessing, so let's hear it."

The cashier's mind ran over three or four young men who, he knew, were in love with Lucy, and some of whom were men of wealth in the place. And one of them, one Walter Richards, seemed to strike him as the one.

"Well, I'll tell ye, then," said his companion; "it is Luke Jackson, that young engineer on th' railroad that they call Air-Line Luke."

"Blazes!" the cashier cried, as he started up, "is that so?"

"It sartainly is."

"And how did you learn it?"

"Oh! th' wimmen folks got holt of it, an' so I heerd it."

The cashier rose and paced the floor in a nervous manner for some minutes, muttering to himself.

"The little fool!" he half hissed, "to think that she will throw herself away upon a lout of an engineer, when I am offering her my name and wealth. She does not know what is good for her, and such a fellow shall not balk me in winning her. I will have her now at any cost, even if I have to secure her by stealth and run away with her. In fact that— But, no more of this."

Presently Lyman sat down again, and his companion said:

"I see it sort o' knocked ye off o' yer pins."

"I admit that it did," the cashier confessed.

"I was not prepared for such a revelation. I thought she had better sense, when there are several men of wealth in this town who would be glad to win her. I thought it must be one of them."

"Jest th' way th' old wimmen around is figgerin' th' thing," declared the villainous-looking man, "an' they mentions you as one of th' disappointed ones. An' I knowed that you had yer eye on her, an' I thought mebbey ye'd like ter run in ahead o' that young feller an' win fu'st money, so ter say."

"What do you mean?" Lyman demanded.

"Jest what I say. I have got it in fer that young chap, fer he got my place on th' road when I was bounced, an' if you want ter put him where th' dogs won't be werry likely ter bite him, I'm th' man ter help you do it."

This was said in a low, earnest tone, and the cashier paid close attention to every word.

And right here it may not be out of place to pause for a moment to offer a word of explanation, and to introduce the hard-looking gentleman more fully.

The man's name was Jake Hogan, and at one time he had been a fireman on the railroad, but being a little too fond of rum, had been discharged. And it so happened that the one to fill his place had been Air-Line Luke. From that hour Hogan was Luke's bitter enemy, looking upon him as the cause of his downfall and the usurper of his rightful place. And further, the little girl that was now crouching behind the boxes in the saloon was Hogan's child. Her mother was dead, having died of sorrow and perhaps starvation, a victim of his horrible curse of rum, and she was all alone in the world, except for her worthless father, and she made

the saloon her home the greater part of the time. And in speaking of "th' wimmen," Hogan referred not to relatives, but to the women of a fourth-rate boarding-house where he lived, and who were ever on the lookout for items of news over which to gossip.

Little Ettie Hogan neither loved—nor was loved by—the people of the boarding-house, for all they cared for her was the service she could render in carrying beer for them from the saloon. And they did not hesitate to beat her often and severely. So the child, as stated, made the saloon her home the greater part of the time, for there she was more kindly treated, and was made useful in many ways, such as washing bottles and glasses and sweeping the floor.

The cashier, looked at Hogan for a moment in silence.

"Hogan," he said presently, "what has your quarrel with that young engineer got to do with me?"

"Nothin', of course," answered the man, "but I thought that you might have somethin' in fer him too, now, an' we could work together ter lay him out."

"No," declared the cashier, "I would not go that far; but I do not mind telling you, Jake," he added, "that if anything *should* happen to him that would dispose of him, I would never mention a word of what you have said to me."

"Is that th' best you kin do?" the hardened rascal asked.

"I fail to understand what you mean," declared the cashier. "Do not think for a moment that I would enter into any plot with you to injure that young man."

"In course not," asserted Hogan, with energy, "an' I hope that you don't fer a single instant think that I would, either."

As he spoke thus, the wretch half-closed one eye in a knowing way, but the cashier would not notice the sign.

"I hardly thought you would," he said, "but still I will not go back on what I have said. If any harm comes to him I will never mention a word of what you have said to me. It would look bad for you if I should, you know."

"In course it would, after my sayin' that I don't like him: an' now if you kin give me just a hundred dollars, I'll tell you about a dream that I had t'other night."

"That is rather a high-priced dream, it seems to me."

"It might look that way at first glance, but it is wu'th th' money, that I'll sure ye."

"Well, let me hear the dream, and then if I think that it is worth the money, I will pay you what you ask for it. You seem to know that I have a fondness for dreams. Who told you that?"

"Oh! I guessed it."

"Well, what was that dream?"

"It was a dream that that young engineer was killed, an' in th' queerest way that ye kin imagine. Ye know, an' if ye don't know I'll tell ye, that about half a mile west of th' station here, there is a big tree that stands close to th' track."

"I know where you mean."

"Werry well. I dreamed that that tree was cut down by somebody, an' that it fell right across th' track, an' that young feller run inter it an' got killed."

"That was a remarkable dream, and no mistake. It is not worth a hundred dollars to me, however."

"What is it wu'th, then?"

"Fifty."

"Hand over ther money."

The cashier counted out several bright, new bills and put them into the hand of the evil plotter, saying:

"Don't think that I am giving you this money for any other purpose than out of charity. To pay you fifty dollars for a simple dream would prove me insane. It is only another form of exercising charity."

"We understands that, in course; an' here's my hand. If that dream o' mine comes true, an' it was so real that I shouldn't be s'prised if it did," with another meaning wink, "we won't say nothin' ter nobody."

"Oh! I will never mention what you have told me. And now I must go. You had better not go out with me. I will go first and alone."

"Jest as you say, boss."

The bank cashier went out, and as he walked away a smile of hatred and revenge lit up his face. The weapon of vengeance had been put into his hands and he was not slow to use it.

"Better luck could not have fallen in my way," he muttered, as he walked homeward. "If Hogan carries out his plan, no suspicion can fall upon me, and that lout of an engineer

will be out of my way forever. Then perhaps I shall be able to carry my point after all. Ha, ha, ha! that girl might as well kick against fate as to try to oppose me. I will have her in spite of her and her father and the rest of them."

But even as these thoughts ran through his head he was measuring up the chances of suspicion falling upon him.

What if Hogan were to be detected in the crime, and made a confession of the plot? And what if it could be proved that he had been in the saloon with Hogan? And what if their conversation had been overheard?

But this was only borrowing trouble. If it came to the worst, would not his word go further than that of such a man as Hogan?

Having gone so far, it was hard to turn back, and he had no intention or desire to do so.

As for Hogan, he was in high feather.

"I thought I could wring him for a few cases," he chuckled, as soon as the cashier was gone, "an' I did. An' now not only will I have 'venge on that upstart, but I'll be paid fer takin' it at th' same time. This very night I'll cut down that tree and drop it across th' track ahead of th' Express Freight, and to th' Old Boy he'll go."

Ettie Hogan, the drunkard's miserable, ragged and dirty little child, in her hiding-place behind the boxes, gave such a start that she was in danger of being discovered. She was but nine years old, yet understood full well the horrible crime her father was contemplating. Her heart beat wildly, but she managed to remain quiet, for discovery meant a beating and being sent to the hated boarding-house, where she would get another for having been so long absent.

The keeper of the saloon understood this, and whenever Ettie was there and her father came in, he never let her presence be known.

Hogan chuckled and muttered to himself for some minutes, and then he called the keeper of the place over to him and ordered something to drink.

"Have you got the money to pay for it?" the proprietor asked.

Hogan displayed a new bill.

"I reckon I have," he boasted.

"Hello! I should say you have!" the keeper exclaimed. "I am glad to see you on your feet again, Jake. You are bound to be a gentleman yet."

Seeing that there was money to be had, the proprietor hurried around and furnished what had been called for, and treated the miserable wretch with as much respect as he could have shown to the greatest ward politician.

Hogan took not only one drink, but many, and not only drank himself, but invited everybody who came in to drink with him. And the result was that within an hour one of the crisp new bills had passed into the possession of the saloon-keeper, and a second one was broken.

And so it went on until about dark, when he got up from the table and staggered out.

Waiting until her father had had time enough to get out of sight, Ettie came out from her hiding-place, hurried out of the room, and then ran away toward the station as fast as ever she could go.

CHAPTER IX.

LUCY TO THE RESCUE.

DAN FIELDING was just preparing to settle down to read the paper, shortly after supper on the evening of which we now write, when a messenger called at the house with word for him to report at once at the station to run out a special train.

As may be imagined, Dan did not relish this, and mentally he wished that railroads in general, with the B. L. & H. in particular, were under the sea; or something to the same effect.

But that did not help the matter any, and after scolding around for a little time he got ready and started out.

Nor did Lucy Fielding like it any better than her father, for it meant that she would have to spend the evening alone, unless some neighbor happened to drop in for an hour or two.

There was no use in worrying over the matter, however, so she took it a good deal more calmly than her father, and wished him a quick trip and safe return.

She went about her work singing and happy, and in a short time had it all done up. And then she sat down to do some sewing.

No one came in during the evening, but the hours passed quickly by, busy as she was with her sewing and her pleasant thoughts, and she was about to retire when came a half-timid knock at the door.

"Who in the world can that be," Lucy thought as she went to open the door.

She was not afraid, and so opened the door without delay.

There on the step stood one of the most miserable-looking and ragged little girls she had ever seen.

"Goodness me!" Lucy cried, "who are you?"

"Please, me name is Ettie Hogan," the child faltered.

"And what do you want—something to eat?"

"I be hungry enough," was the child's answer, "but I didn't come fer nothin' ter eat."

"Then what do you want?" Lucy demanded, not a little anxious to know what was the cause of the child's excited manner.

"Please, will ye tell me what yer name is?" the little one asked.

"What my name is?"

"Yes, ma'm."

"My name is Lucy Fielding," was the reply.

"Why do you ask that?"

"Then it is you that I want ter see," declared the ragged girl, in greater excitement than ever.

"And what do you want to see me for?"

"It is you that be goin' ter marry th' young engineer on th' railroad, ain't it?" the child further questioned.

"Child, you puzzle me," said Lucy. "Please tell me at once what you are coming at."

"Well, I will; but please let me come into th' house so that no one kin hear me. It is awful 'portant."

Lucy allowed her to step inside, and then urged her to hurry with her story, for her in-born curiosity was now fully aroused.

And as soon as she could collect her ideas, the child began:

"Early this evenin', ma'am," she said, "I heard two men a-talkin', an' they was plannin' ter do somethin' awful bad. They were talkin' about you, an'—"

"About me!" cried Lucy, her thoughts turning at once to her rejected suitor and her father's words of warning.

"Yes; an' they was plannin' ter kill th' man ye intends ter marry. That was what I got on to of what they said, an' knowin' who you was I made up my mind ter tell ye so's you might have a chance ter see that they didn't do it. I wanted ter git here in time so's you could save him. Only you mustn't let any one find out that it was me as told yer."

Pale and trembling, and with wildly beating heart, Lucy demanded:

"And who were those men?"

"That I can't tell ye, ma'm, indeed I can't. I would git killed if I did. But let me finish tellin' ye all about it, so's ye kin do somethin'."

"Yes, yes, go ahead," Lucy urged eagerly.

"It is th' ingine man on th' Freight they intends ter kill, an' they be goin' ter chop down a big tree an' drop it right across th' track an' let him run inter it."

Lucy was almost beside herself for an instant at the horror of what she had heard.

"And do you know what train it is? or what the man's name is?" she inquired.

"It is th' freight train, an' th' man is th' one that you be goin' ter marry, an' that is all I know about it."

"Mercy sakes!" Lucy gasped, "can this be true?"

"There's not th' word of a lie about it, ma'm," declared the child, earnestly and excitedly.

"Oh! I believe you, my child; but I was wondering whether you could not be mistaken about it all. It seems too horrible to be true. Will you not tell me who the men were whom you overheard?"

"No, no, not for th' world; fer they would kill me, sure. An' now that I have told ye, an' done all I kin, I will go."

Lucy glanced at the clock.

In half an hour her lover's train would be due.

"You say you heard of this early this evenin'?" she questioned, not allowing the child to go.

"Yes, ma'm."

"Then why did you not come and tell me, or some one else, at once? It may be too late now to prevent the murder."

"I started fer th' station as soon as I heard it, ma'm, but I was seen and made ter do work at th' boardin'-house."

This accounted for the loss of time. The girl had been seen by the landlady of the boarding-house and dragged home. And as her father was the guilty one, she dared not mention what she had heard there.

"And why did you not tell some one there?" Lucy further demanded.

"Oh, please, I couldn't. You don't know,

ma'm; you— But, let me go, an' then I'll an' do all you kin."

"Yes, I will hurry; but you shall go with me," was Lucy's quick decision, and she hurriedly put on a shawl and hat.

"No, I can't go with ye—really I can't," the child objected. "I was sent out fer beer, an' if I don't go right back I'll git 'most killed."

"Where do you live?" Lucy asked.

She was told, and when the child insisted, with tears, that she must go, she allowed her to do so, not having time for any further words with her.

The child had explained a little more than we have quoted, and Lucy understood that the place where the crime was intended was about half a mile above the station, where there was a big tree. And she knew the place well, having played there many a day when a child.

And as soon as the child was gone she asked herself what she should do.

It was her first impulse to run at once to the station, but her time was limited, and the station was in the opposite direction to that from which the train would come, and she feared that she would not have time to reach there early enough to do any good.

It was a trying moment.

No, she must go to the rescue herself. It would not do for her to waste one moment of the precious time.

There happened to be a lantern in the house, and lighting that as quickly as she could she caught up a piece of red flannel and started, taking barely time enough to lock the door after her.

What she intended to do with the red flannel will be shown presently.

The nearest way to her objective point lay across the fields, the railroad being on the outskirts of the town, and that way she started without a moment's hesitation.

The hour was getting late, and the way was wild and lonely, but the girl was brave, and the desperate situation lent her additional courage.

On she went, the lantern she carried lighting her way, climbing over fences and jumping over ditches, wherever necessary, with marvelous agility.

And she had not gone a great distance when she heard the loud, deep tone of the whistle of her lover's locomotive, away off among the hills, and that lent new strength and speed to her limbs.

On and on she ran, until at last she was obliged to pause for want of breath.

And then she heard the sound of an ax, the blows falling rapidly and strongly, and instantly realized what it meant.

"Even now the villains are at their heinous work," she gasped, and as soon as she could recover sufficient breath she started on.

Once more the whistle of the train sounded, now nearer than before, though yet some miles away.

"I shall be too late," was the girl's despairing thought, as she strained every muscle and nerve to its utmost.

At last, though, after what seemed to be an age, she came out to the railroad, and then she hurried along toward the point where the large tree stood.

It was some little distance yet to that place, and before she reached there she stopped once or twice to listen for the sound of the ax. And each time she heard its blows still falling.

At the place where the tree stood there was a bank on each side of the track, and the tree was on the side opposite to where the girl was walking. Here the road ran through a cut perhaps ten feet deep.

When Lucy came opposite to the tree she stooped, and called out:

"What are you doing over there?"

There was no answer, but the sound of the ax stopped instantly, and for a moment the girl thought that she had frightened the men away. But a moment later her blood was fairly chilled with horror. There came a terrific crash, and down upon the track came the tree with a force that fairly shook the ground.

"Oh! horror!" the girl cried, aloud. "It is done!"

She stood as though rooted to the spot for a moment, and then the next minute she was startled to hear a groan come up from the track where the tree had fallen.

"Goodness!" she exclaimed, "the tree has surely fallen upon some one, crushing him to the ground. Perhaps I can help him out."

Such was the case, but the one upon whom it had fallen was the one who had cut it down. And that one was Jake Hogan. Just as the tree was falling he slipped and fell into the cut, and

before he could get out of the way the tree was down upon him.

Lucy hurried down, lighting her way with her lantern, and guided by the groans, soon found the man. And a horrible fate he had met. He was pinned to the earth by a sharp-pointed broken branch, the stick having gone right through his body.

The sickening sight almost caused the girl to faint, but she nerved herself and tried to get the man out. But she was unable to do so. She could not move the heavy limb that held him down.

CHAPTER X.

THE SIGNAL DOES ITS WORK.

WHILE she was straining to lift the branch, the man caught sight of her face and exclaimed:

"Girl, ain't you Dan Fieldin's darter?"

"Yes," Lucy answered, "I am."

"Then leave me right here an' let me die, an' you hurry round th' bend there an' save yer lover. His is th' fu'st train that will be along either way, an' you'll have ter git round there lively if ye want ter be in time. I'm done fer, an' I deserved it all an' a good deal more."

"Was it you that cut the tree?" Lucy asked.

"Yes, it was me."

"And who are you?"

"I am Jake Hogan."

"And who engaged you to do it?"

"That I won't tell, miss; I'll take it all on meself. An' now if ye want ter save that young engineer, you'd better be a-movin'. His train will soon be here, an' then it will be too late."

At that instant the whistle was scounded, and forgetful of all else, Lucy ran forward to warn her lover of his peril.

And as she ran she wound the piece of red flannel around the lantern she carried, thus making a redlight of it—the signal of danger.

It was quite a little distance around the bend, and now the rumble of the approaching train could be plainly heard. And feeling the full weight of the responsibility that rested upon her, the brave girl ran forward with all the speed she could command.

The train was rushing along at good speed, being a few minutes late, and the steady hand of the young engineer was upon the throttle and his eyes fixed upon the track ahead.

On the opposite side of the cab sat Wilson Hooper, the detective.

The two exchanged a few words now and then, but the engineer did not allow conversation to draw his attention away from his work. Air-Line Luke was a careful man at the throttle, and fewer accidents would have to be recorded if all engineers were as watchful. As a class, however, the drivers are both careful and watchful to a marked degree.

The train had made its last stop west of West Plain, and Luke was now pushing to make that point on time.

The detective had been looking ahead for some minutes in silence, as they sped along, and was just turning to say something to the engineer, when he was startled to see Luke spring suddenly to his feet, give one short and sharp pull at the whistle, push in the throttle, and then throw over the reverse-lever, and all this within the space of a single second—as it seemed.

Hooper was startled, as well he might be.

What was the danger?

As soon as what we have described was done, the young engineer thrust his head out of the cab and looked steadily ahead, opening the throttle a little as he did so, and thus gently reversing the motion of the drivers.

Hooper followed his example, throwing open the window on his side of the cab and looking out.

At first he could see nothing to signify that there was danger ahead, and he wondered more than ever what the young engineer had seen.

"What is it?" he shouted, as Luke looked back into the cab for an instant.

"Redlight ahead," was the brief answer.

Hooper looked again, and this time he could see it, though it was so dim and seemingly so far away that he wondered how Luke could have seen it so soon.

To and fro across the track it waved, like a mere speck in the darkness, but it came near with startling swiftness.

Air-Line Luke was now working his engine in the back-motion pretty hard, and twice more he called for brakes.

The speed was fast being reduced, but it was still too great for safety if the danger lay right where the redlight was being displayed.

In a few moments that point was reached, and

the engine swept by with still considerable speed, but once again the warning call of the whistle was sounded.

Back upon the tops of the cars the brakeman and the conductor were doing all they could to reduce speed, and their hearts were in their throats, as the saying has it, for they could not understand what the danger was. But the thing they did understand was that Air-Line Luke had signaled danger.

When they came upon the redlight and saw that it was in the hands of a woman, as they could make out in the dim light, all were puzzled, and none more so than the young engineer.

In a few moments after the redlight was passed the danger was at hand, but the train was then about stopped, with the headlight of the engine falling upon the tree that blocked the way.

"Great Scott!" the young engineer exclaimed, "this was a close call for us, and we owe our lives to that woman."

"What woman?" queried the detective.

"Why, the one who stopped us. Come, let's look around here and see what this means. It looks to me like crooked work. That tree never fell there without help."

They both sprung down and ran forward to where the tree lay, and then to their horror they discovered the body of Jake Hogan. We say the body, for the man was now dead.

"Do you know him?" the detective asked.

"Yes," Luke answered, and he told who it was.

A moment's examination showed that the tree had been cut, and Luke was not long in deciding that Hogan had been the one to cut it.

The conductor and the brakemen came running forward, with the exception of the flagman, and, all together, they succeeded in lifting the branch of the tree that had caused Hogan's death, and removed his body.

Some minutes later, when they were discussing how to clear the track, Lucy Fielding came up.

The meeting between her and Luke can be better imagined than described.

When Lucy had told her story, the men were so incensed at what Hogan had done, that they were tempted to throw his body aside and leave it. But Air-Line Luke set them right on that point.

"He met his death in the act," he said, "and has passed to a higher court of justice than any of earth."

The body of the wretch was placed in a car.

Then arose the question of clearing the way.

"The best way that I can think of," suggested the engineer, "is to hook the drag-rope to it, pull it back out of the cut, and roll it down the bank."

"Just the thing," agreed the conductor. "It may pull down some earth upon the track, but we can soon shovel that out of the way."

"How about trains coming the other way?" the detective asked.

"No train has any right to come that way until we get to West Plain," the conductor answered.

Air-Line Luke led Lucy to the engine and helped her up the cab, and the detective joined them.

In a few moments the trainmen had the drag-rope out from its place on the rear of the engine tank, and fastening one end to the front of the engine the other was secured to the trunk of the tree. As soon as all was ready the engineer whistled to back, and started.

Over rolled the tree, tearing down considerable of the bank as it was pulled along, and soon it was lying straight with the track. Slowly then the engine moved forward and did not stop until the tree was out of the cut and well out upon the bank that lay beyond.

There the engine stopped, and, after a few minutes' work, the tree was rolled down the bank and out of the way.

It was a most fortunate ending to what had at first promised certain death to the young engineer and probably to all on the train.

In about twenty minutes the road was all clear and the train went on to West Plain Station.

There the other Express Freight was found waiting, and when the cause of the delay was made known there was much excitement.

"That was worse than the specter at the bridge," declared the engineer of the west-bound train, "for that is harmless, even if it isn't very pleasant to look at."

"Why, have you seen it again?" inquired Luke.

"You kin bet we have," was the retort of the fireman, "but we didn't ketch him."

"And are not likely to," added the engineer.

Luke said nothing to this, but in his mind was resolved that, if that ghost could be laid, he was going to put it down.

Of course Lucy had been helped down from the engine as soon as the train came to a stop, and the young engineer's first care was to find some one whom he could trust to see her safely home. This done, he bade the brave girl good-night and she set out at once.

When the train started on its way, Luke left his friend, Hooper, standing on the platform waiting for the passenger train that would now soon be along, and pulling the throttle wide, tried to make up some of his lost time.

When they came to the bridge both engineer and fireman were on the lookout for the spectral visitant, which was seen again in about the same manner as has been described in previous chapters.

CHAPTER XI.

THE DETECTIVE LEFT.

HOOPER, the detective, remained on the platform of the station at West Plain after the Express Freight had gone, and walked up and down to pass away the time.

As he had confessed to Luke, he had not had the best of luck in his task of unraveling the bank mystery; there was something behind it all which he had failed to fathom.

He had made the acquaintance of the cashier, Stewart Lyman, but had learned little or nothing of him, and decided that one of two things was certain. The cashier was either entirely innocent, or was a most consummate rogue who could keep his secret well; and though the detective had suspected the cashier, from the first, he could fasten nothing upon him of a suspicious character.

But, he had not given his whole attention to that gentleman. Others were being studied as well as he, and they were being watched.

The further Hooper looked into the case, however, the more he was impressed with the conviction that the cashier was the one at the bottom of it all. This was because most of the other suspected ones had more or less to do with the cashier in one way or another; hence, the persons whom he now desired to shadow were some of Lyman's acquaintances and associates.

While he waited for the arrival of the train, his attention was attracted to two men who were seemingly waiting with the same object in view—that is, they were there to meet the train.

The detective, seated on a baggage-truck, at the upper end of the platform, was leaning over, with his head held in his hands, as though half-asleep, while the two were walking up and down, passing the point where he was seated at every turn they made.

At these times the detective could catch now and then a word of what they were talking about, and this conversation drew his attention to them.

"I suppose it is a certain thing that they will come," one of them remarked, at one turn when they were in the hearing of the detective.

"Yes, they will come fast enough," was the response. "And as soon as we get them we will lose no time in getting away."

Presently he heard further:

"What do you think about this change? Don't you think we have been doing well enough with the old?"

"Yes, they were going well enough, but there is such a thing as having too many of one kind, you know."

This was all the detective caught for some time, but again overheard a few words more.

"Yes, I agree with you," one was saying at one turn in their walk, "we shall soon have to change quarters. Too much attention is being called to that place."

"Just what I told them at first," declared the other. "It was no use use trying to drive anything into their heads, though."

Now while the detective could not, of course, understand what all this was about, he had a suspicion that he and these men were waiting for the same party on the train, and felt that, on the arrival of the train, he should learn something to give him a clew upon which to work.

Finally the train came, and with it the men whom Hooper was looking for, while, much to his satisfaction, the two who had been waiting with him greeted them, and all four hurried away from the station—the detective following after them.

Their destination proved to be a public house, and, a few minutes after they had entered, the detective also went in.

The men were at the bar, and when the detective went up to the register he heard one of them ask:

"Has word of any kind been left here for Henry Wallington?"

"Yes," was the answer of the barkeeper, "here is a letter left here for a person of that name," and he handed the letter over to the stranger.

The stranger took it, opened it, and threw the envelope down upon the floor.

"Well, what is the word?" asked his companion.

"It is all right," was the response.

"That is good," was the comment.

Without further words, the two took chairs and sat down, and entered into the conversation of those around them; and any one who paid any attention to what was said would have set the two down as commercial travelers, or "drummers."

The detective bought a cigar at the bar; then stooped, in a careless way, and picked up the envelope just thrown down by one of the strangers; carelessly he tore it open, and with half of it lighted the cigar, throwing a piece of it back onto the floor. But, at the same time, he very cleverly managed to retain the super-
scription.

Walking around in rather a fussy way for some moments, Hooper finally engaged a room, and sat down not far from the two strangers and pretended to read a paper.

He now had an opportunity to study the direction on the envelope. The name was written in a bold, running hand, and the detective recognized the writing at once—it was unmistakably that of Stewart Lyman, the cashier of the bank!

Now it was for him to shadow these men until he found out what their business was.

He had once before seen them at West Plain, had followed them to the City of Marysville, and, there learning that they intended to return again to West Plain on this night, had followed, or rather preceded them—to learn definitely what they were after.

The detective listened to their conversation, but overheard nothing of a suspicious character, and, at last, was obliged to admit that they were what they seemed, drummers, or else were sharp enough to play a misleading game and play it well.

As for the other two men, the ones who had met the strangers at the station, they seemed also to be strangers at West Plain, or at any rate were not citizens. And they had less to say than the new arrivals.

Presently one of them rose and said:

"Well, shall we take a little walk out and see the town before we retire?"

"Pretty late for anything of that sort, isn't it?" questioned another.

"What time do you close, landlord?" asked yet another.

"Midnight," was the brief reply.

"Plenty of time, then, for a little look around," declared the first speaker, "so come on."

One of the others arose to go with him, but the other two declined.

"We can see it all to-morrow," said one of them, "and prefer to take it easy now."

"Well, we will be back presently," promised the two who insisted upon going; and with these words they set out.

The detective knew not what to do; ought he to follow the men, or remain there and keep his eye upon the others?

He decided to look after those who had gone out, and when he got out into the street he saw them at a little distance away. They were walking slowly, and he had no trouble in keeping them in sight without suspicion. At any rate, that was what he thought.

These had not been long gone from the hotel, when the remaining two decided rather suddenly that they too would go out.

Before going, however, one of them stepped to the bar and called for a sheet of paper.

This being handed him, he wrote a brief note, which he gave to the barkeeper, with a few words of explanation.

Then they set out, and were soon lost to sight from the hotel.

For quite a little time the two whom the detective was following walked about the streets in an aimless manner, and Hooper was half-inclined to think that they were just what they had pretended to be, and that he was on a blind trail. They seemed to be simply taking a view of the town by lamplight, and clearly had no definite objective point in view.

So the detective thought, but had he known

that he was being cleverly duped, he would have been more wide awake.

He was fighting against men who were his equals, if not superiors, and who were up to every trick in the profession.

But Hooper was yet a young man at the business, and there was plenty that he could yet learn. And this he was ever willing to own. He did not claim to be a great detective, but still in his own mind he thought that he knew quite a few tricks—and he undoubtedly did; but there are times when the best of them will get left on a turn in the game.

The men he was shadowing gradually worked their way out of the lighted streets into the more shadowy ones, and the detective kept on after them like a tireless sleuth on a trail of vengeance.

But he began to tire of so unimportant a task, and was just on the point of giving it up when a remarkable thing happened.

The two men disappeared!

And their disappearance was as sudden as though the earth had opened and taken them in.

The detective stopped short and gazed at the point where he had last seen them, in open-mouthed amazement.

He paused only an instant, however, and then he went on to the place where they had disappeared. He did not hurry, for that would have "given away" the fact that he was following them, did they happen to be on the watch, as he now might suppose them to be.

When he came to that point, however, he could see nothing of them, and in order not to let his own game be known, he walked right on up the street at the same slow pace, and so back to the hotel, to discover that the other two had disappeared.

He was both surprised and chagrined at this, and more so when the barkeeper handed him a note that had been left for him, and still a great deal more so when he opened the note and read it.

CHAPTER XII.

IN HARD LUCK.

WILSON HOOPER awoke to the fact that he had been over-reached, and in such a clever manner that he was almost at loss to see how it had been done.

The note read as follows:

"TO DETECTIVE HOOPER:—

"You are a wide awake young man, but you are young. You will learn more as you grow older. Do not think that you can catch old birds with salt, for it can't be done. You will not see us at West Plain again, so you may as well give up the case as a bad job. Yours truly,

"TOM, DICK AND HARRY."

The detective saw that he had been duped in the neatest manner possible, and vowed to himself that he would bring "Tom, Dick and Harry" to grief, if he could possibly do it.

What puzzled him most was how they had managed to detect who he was. He had felt that his disguise was almost perfect, since Air-Line Luke had failed to recognize him.

Surely some one of the three must know him well.

What should he do now?

It did not take him a great while to decide.

There was a train back to Marysville in about twenty minutes, and his mind was soon made up to take it and return to that place, which he did, but to return the next morning to West Plain in another disguise, and was once more prepared to take up the case.

This time he appeared upon the scene as a book-agent.

He had sacrificed his mustache, and wore a pair of glasses such as are worn by persons suffering from weak eyes. These changes, taken with others in the way of attire, gave him a disguise that was next to perfect.

Of course the men of the previous night were not to be found then, but he had a clew, and that clew was that the cashier of the bank was the person who had left the note for them at the hotel.

The thought came to him that perhaps it was the cashier who had warned them that he was a detective, and had told them to outwit him and get away from him if they could, which—and the detective had to smile as he thought of it—had not been a very hard matter to accomplish.

Reflection, however, told him that the cashier could have had nothing to do with it, and there appeared plenty of reasons to support that theory.

When he arrived at West Plain on that morning, he went again to the same hotel and spoke for board for a week; and, having settled that, started out to sell his book.

And during the entire day he gave his attention to nothing else.

No genuine agent could have worked harder or more earnestly than did he. And his only object was to throw suspicion off, if any attached to him, as being a detective.

And he confined his operations to the stores and business houses, explaining that after he had gone the rounds there, he would then attack the residences; and in this connection he warned those who refused to buy that he would certainly give them a chance to reconsider the matter.

The subscriptions he took were honored, for he turned the names over to a friend who was in that line of business.

In the course of the day he called at the bank.

There, however, he met with no success so far as the selling of his book was concerned, though he did strike oil in another direction.

He had not asked to see the president of the institution, and wisely, too, for if the cashier did suspect, would he not have an eye upon any one who might come to see the president in private?

So the detective reasoned, and he confined his attention to the clerks.

Of course he could hardly expect to sell a book in the bank in business hours, but, nevertheless, he went in, and while he was there another man came in and presented a check at the cashier's window.

Nothing unusual was there in this, but the detective allowed nothing to escape his eye, and he noticed everything about this man that could be noted.

Had he noted a little more it would have been better for him, but he did not observe the slight start that the man gave when his eye fell upon the pretended agent.

If he had noticed this he might have taken it for granted that he was recognized, and have been on the lookout for danger. But perhaps that would have made no difference in the events that followed.

One thing that the detective *did* get, was that there seemed to pass some talk between the cashier and the man at the window that could not relate to the simple business of cashing a check. And as he, the detective, was going out, he caught the words:

"Yes, at nine o'clock."

This was spoken by the cashier.

Hooper went on out, and continued right on at his new business until night, when he went to the hotel, and, to all appearances, settled down there for the night.

But settle down he did not.

A little after dark he came down from his room, and leaving the house by a rear way, passed around and out upon the street.

And he wore yet a new disguise.

This time he appeared as a rather rough-looking fellow, and one who was just a trifle under the influence of the ardent.

Having learned where the cashier lived, and being intent upon following him for an evening, he went at once in the direction of his house, and when near it stopped, waiting in the shadow of a building for him to appear.

Having been on the case for a week, he knew more or less about the habits of all the employees of the bank, and he had figured upon the cashier's dinner-hour as the proper time for him to set out to watch him.

And he was right. In a short time the cashier made his appearance, and came down with rapid strides toward the place where the detective was in hiding. And seeing him coming, Hooper came out and began to stagger on in the same direction, allowing the cashier to pass him after a little.

Lyman paid no attention to him as he passed, and as any one would have said, Hooper paid no attention to him. But this was not the case. The detective looked him over closely as he passed.

The cashier seemed to be troubled. And in truth he was. His mind was far from easy upon the matter of the previous night. He would have given much to know that Jack Hogan had died without naming him as being concerned in the attempt at train-wrecking.

He walked on with head down, and the detective could follow him without any great effort at secrecy.

The direction was taken toward the station, and as that was on the outskirts of the town, the street became lonely as they went on.

At length the cashier met a man and stopped, and the surroundings at that point were such that the detective found no difficulty in approaching near enough to hear what was said.

And at the same time his own presence was

not likely to be known, unless the cashier was a great deal sharper than he gave him credit for being, for the other man could not possibly know of his being there, not having seen him previously.

"Are you ready to help me?" the cashier demanded.

"Yes, sir, I am," was the reply.

"And you swear that you will keep the secret?"

"I do."

These questions and answers were given in a low tone, and the detective could barely make them out.

"And you know what is required of you?"

"Yes, ter a certain extent, but you must put me on ter jest what you want did in th' matter so's we won't misunderstand each other."

"That is quite right."

"Well, then, I am ready ter be instructed."

"Very well, and you must give close attention."

"All right, I'm ready."

"In the first place, then, you will take a message to the girl that she is wanted at a certain place at a certain hour."

"But will she go?"

"Yes, sir! I will take care that it will be such a message that she won't disregard it for a moment."

"Well, then what?"

"Then you will offer your company to the place I shall note, and if she will allow you to do so, you will accompany her. If not, then let her come on alone, and you hasten on and join me. Do you understand this?"

"Yes, that is all straight enough."

"Then a little this side of the place named I will be in waiting with a carriage all ready, and when she comes along we will bundle her in and then away."

"That looks all easy enough, if you kin do your part in gettin' her out of the house with the decoy note."

"And I agree to do that part of it without any trouble. Now go to the stable and wait until I come."

"All right."

And so they parted, each in a different direction.

This man was a stranger to the detective. It was not the one he had seen in the bank that afternoon. What the plot could be Hooper could not guess. Had he been aware of all the evil the cashier was up to, and of his intention toward pretty Lucy Fielding, he would have understood it all.

When the cashier had walked away, the detective was about to follow when heavy hands fell upon him and he was rendered powerless in a moment. Some hands held his arms, others held his legs, and still others were placed over his mouth.

He was seriously in the toils.

"Your little game is up, Mr. Book-agent, and the hour of settlement is at hand. How do you find yourself? We hope that you are well, but we know that you won't be, in a few short hours."

Hooper recognized the speaker as the man he had seen in the bank. And, not only that, but now he could see that he had then been in slight disguise, and that it was one of the men who had escaped from him so cleverly on the previous night.

Needless to say he felt sick. He had thought that he was something of a detective, and indeed his record was very good; but here he was being handled like a very novice.

Very little was said, but the unfortunate shadow was speedily bound and gagged, and, being carried a short distance, was bundled into a wagon, and then all the men—four in number—springing in, the wagon was driven rapidly away. And as it rattled along over the road the detective was blindfolded.

CHAPTER XIII.

HOT ON THE TRAIL.

"AIR-LINE LUKE was off duty.

This was the night for which he had asked, and the night in which he intended to try his hand at laying the ghost at the bridge.

When he reached Marysville with his train that morning, he went at once to bed, in order to secure his usual rest.

He had changed off on the road with the engineer of a stock-train that was going west, the engineer of which was to run his train while he was off, and thus he got back to Marysville a day earlier than he could had he made the round trip. This is mentioned, by the way, to make all clear to those who are versed in railroad matters.

It was about two o'clock in the afternoon when he got up, and his first care was for his inner man. He secured a hearty dinner, and then he felt able to cope with all the ghosts in the county.

His next care was one of a different nature.

Going to a well-known gun-store, he asked to see some revolvers, and the weapons being laid out before him, he made a good selection, and one which the dealer complimented highly.

"You have the best revolver I had in my stock," he said.

"I am glad to know that," responded Luke.

"May I ask if you are an officer?" the dealer questioned.

"No, sir, I am not," was the young engineer's reply; "I am a locomotive engineer. I shall keep the weapon on my engine."

"And no doubt it will some time come in useful there. I see by the papers that one of the Freight engineers had quite an adventure last night near West Plain. Do you know him?"

Luke smiled.

"I happen to be the one who had that adventure," he admitted with all modesty, and then to avoid further questions, after he had given an account of the affair, he pleaded haste and departed.

Next he called at the office of the superintendent, having received a telegram to do so.

"Good-morning, Luke," saluted that officer.

"I hear you had another adventure last night?" "Yes," Luke admitted, "and it came near being a serious one, too."

"So I should think. Is it true that it was Dan Fielding's daughter who stopped you?"

"Yes, sir."

"I had heard so, and I wanted to be sure. Now what do you think of that matter?"

"In what way do you mean, sir?"

"Well, what do you think was Hogan's object?"

"Why, I have heard that he had it in for me because I happened to get his place as fireman when he was discharged."

"And you think that was why he cut the tree?"

"No doubt it was."

"Then you think there was nothing further back of it, eh?"

"I do not know, of course, but as I am going down to West Plain this afternoon I will try and learn all I can about it."

"That is what I wanted to see you about. As you are going down there to hunt ghosts, I want you to turn detective and do a little man-hunting as well. Do you think you can do it?"

"I can try, sir, if you will tell me what you want me to do."

"Very well. I want you to make some inquiries, in a clever way, and find out whether Hogan was alone in that affair, or whether he was only the tool of some other rascal or rascals."

"I will do so."

"Hogan has met his fate, so he is counted out; but if there was any one else in the plot with him, he must be hunted down and brought to justice. If he is allowed to go free, there is no telling when he will try some such game again."

"I will do the best I can," said Luke, and after some further remarks he went away.

And the next train out found him on his way to West Plain.

When he arrived there he went at once to the home of his promised bride, and Lucy, of course, was more than pleased to see him.

The afternoon was by this time well advanced, and Lucy knew that he must be off duty, or he could not be there at that hour. And of course she made that her first inquiry, almost.

"Yes," said Luke, "I am off duty for a trip. I am going on a ghost-hunting expedition to-night."

"Ghost-hunting?"

"Exactly so, my pretty one; would you like to go along?"

"No, I thank you," Lucy answered. And then she asked:

"Are you going to hunt for the ghost that is down at the Warland River bridge—the one all the railroad people are talking about?"

"Yes, that is the one. I will make you a present of it if I catch it," with a laugh.

"You have not caught it yet," retorted Lucy, "but if you do you may keep it."

So they talked on for some time, and then Luke changed the subject.

"Lucy," he said, "I want all the information you can give me about that affair of last night."

"I have told you all there is to tell," the girl answered.

"Then please tell me all over again."

Lucy complied, going over the whole case as far as it was known to her.

"And that little girl said she overheard two men talking about it, eh?" inquired Luke.

"Yes, that was what she said."

"But she would not tell who they were."

"No."

"Have you any suspicion who the second one was?"

"If I have it would not be right to mention it, for it might prove but a suspicion, and would be unjust to the one suspected."

"Perhaps you are right, and I will not press you on that point. I must ask where I can find that little girl, however."

"She is down at that wretched boarding-house," Lucy explained.

"So I thought. I will go down there at once and see her. I will return in the course of an hour, or at any rate in time to take tea with you and your father, if you will permit me to do so."

Nothing would please Lucy more, and with this understanding Luke set out to find Ettie Hogan.

He had no trouble in finding the boarding-house, for he knew well enough where it was, but he was not so fortunate in finding the little girl of whom he was in search.

She was out, and that was all the information he could get.

Hogan's body, by the way, was not at the house, but was at the shop of an undertaker, if it had not already been buried. No one seemed to care anything about the matter, and no one had spoken about it to the little orphan.

Luke was about coming away when he was stopped by one of the work-girls of the house, who said:

"Dhe gurrel was sint fer beer above an hour ago, sir, an' it's down in dhe saloon yez will be after foindin' her."

Luke inquired what saloon, and then set out to go there.

When he arrived he was told that the child had been there, but had left her pail and had gone on somewhere else.

Here was a block in the game, but at that moment two men entered the room and one of them said, addressing the barkeeper:

"That little gal of Hogan's is down there at the undertaker's, and she is raising merry Ned because he will not let her see her dead father."

"Where is the shop?" asked Luke, instantly.

He was told, and immediately he set out to find it, or rather to go there, for he knew the city well enough.

When he came there he found the situation just as the man in the saloon had described it. The little girl was at the door and was begging to be allowed to see her father before he was taken away forever.

Just as Luke arrived the undertaker came out and harshly ordered her away.

The young engineer stepped up at once and said:

"Mr. Stone, please oblige me by allowing me to see the body of Mr. Hogan."

"You are none too early," declared the undertaker, as he threw open the door, "for I am about to take it away. Come right in."

Luke gave his hand to the little girl and led her into the shop, and much to the undertaker's displeasure he had to do the very thing he had refused to do. That is, he had to let the child see her dead father.

When the child had gazed for a moment upon his face she was ready to go, and thanking the undertaker for obliging him Luke led her away.

When they were out of the place, Luke said:

"You are the little girl who ran and told Miss Fielding that the tree was to be cut down and dropped across the track, are you not?"

"Yes, sir," was the reply.

"And I am the engineer whose life you saved by so doing," Luke explained. "I would no doubt be dead now had it not been for you, and I shall not forget you. Where are you going to live, now that you have no one to care for you?"

"I never had any one to care for me anyhow," replied the child between her sobs, "and I s'pose that I'll have to stay at th' boardin'-house."

"Would you like to leave there and have a good home and grow up to be a good woman?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then you shall. Come with me."

Air-line Luke led the child straight to his own home (it has been mentioned that his home was at West Plain), and placed her in the care of his mother, and when he had told the whole story his mother took the child to her arms and her future was secure.

"And now, Ettie," Luke said, "after what I have done for you I want you to do something for me."

"What is it?" the child asked.

"I want you to tell me who it was you heard planning with your father to cut down the tree and kill me."

"You won't let him hurt me, will ye?"

"No one shall hurt you."

"Then I will tell ye. It was the man who pays out de money down in th' bank. I can't think of his name."

"Stewart Lyman!" the young engineer cried.

"Yes, that's his name."

CHAPTER XIV.

LAYING THE GHOST.

By this time evening was coming on, and Air-line Luke lost no time in getting back to the home of his sweetheart. He now had valuable information in his possession, and on the morrow he intended to have the cashier arrested. He had cautioned his mother and the little girl to say nothing to any one, for if the cashier should get any idea that his secret was known, no doubt he would lose no time in getting away.

When Luke reached the house he found Dan Fielding there, and he was not in a very good humor, either.

"What has happened to rumple your feathers so?" Luke asked, pleasantly.

"Enough has happened," Dan growled. "I have got run out another special train to-night."

"Well, that isn't very pleasant, that's a fact," confessed Luke; "but if you will work for a railroad that is what you must expect."

"Yes, no doubt you're right."

Supper passed off pleasantly, and while they were at the table Luke told them of his success in finding the little girl, and of the secret he had got out of her.

"The very one I suspected!" exclaimed Lucy, when she heard the cashier's name mentioned.

"And so did I suspect him," declared Luke.

"But the question is: Can you fasten the crime upon him?" observed Dan.

"I think we can," answered Luke. "At any rate we can try, and when I report the facts to the super., I think he will make it warm for Mr. Lyman."

"No doubt about that," agreed Dan. And he added:

"So, you are going down there to the bridge to lay that spook, are you?"

"Yes, I am going down to take a close look at it, if nothing more," answered Luke.

"Well, I hope you'll succeed in solving the mystery, for I for one am tired of hearing it talked about."

"And I am tired of seeing it," declared the young engineer.

"I suppose I will pass there about midnight," said Dan, "and if you think you will have seen enough by that time I will have my engineer stop and pick you up."

"No," said Luke, "you need not do that, but I'll tell you what you may do if you will."

"And what is that?"

"Tell your engineer that if he sees the ghost when he comes west, not to shut off steam at all, but to come right along as fast as he can turn his wheels."

"What is your idea in that?"

"Well, if there is any trick about the ghost, I think that it can be fooled if a train comes along at a little unusual speed."

"Very well, I will tell him and have him try it."

Dan had to hurry away, and Luke and Lucy were left alone to enjoy a pleasant hour. And pleasant such hours were to them, as can well be imagined.

About nine o'clock Luke took his leave, and set out at once for the scene of his ghostly vigil.

Going to the station he got upon the engine of the first train that came along going in the right direction, and when about half a mile from the bridge the engineer slowed up and let him get off.

And from that point he proceeded on foot.

He walked down the track for some distance, observing as much silence as possible, but when he drew near to the place where the ghost was usually seen he stepped aside from the track and walked along the side of the bank, keeping his eyes about on a level with the rails.

This bank was about twenty feet high, so it afforded the young engineer every chance to keep out of sight if any one happened along and he desired to do so.

In this manner he walked on in silence, and at length he came to the place where he intended to stop and watch. He sat down on the side of

the fill, just far enough up to command a full view of the track.

It was summer, so he was comfortable in his not enviable place.

Some time passed before any train came along, and the first one to come was the Express Freight, Luke's own train.

When the young engineer heard it coming he began to look out for the ghost, but much to his disappointment no specter appeared.

With a wild scream of the whistle the train came down the grade, but nothing was seen of the opposition.

Luke was put out. He could not understand this. When the thing had been seen every night for so long a time, why should it not appear now?

"Perhaps his Majesty knows I am here watching for him," he commented in his thoughts.

After a little time the Express Freight east came along; still, nothing was seen of the ghost, and Air-Line Luke began to grow vexed.

"This must be his Majesty's night off," he muttered. "I have come to make a night of it, however, so I will stay right here and keep cool about it. Something may turn up yet."

Some time later a passenger train east came along, and yet, no indication of the white visitant.

It was not long then, however, when Luke heard some persons approaching the place. They were coming up along the bank of the river. There were four or five of them, as he judged, and they were talking in low tones.

The young engineer kept close to the bank and waited to learn who and what they were.

When they came nearer he found that there were five of them, and that one of them was evidently a prisoner. This one seemed to have his arms tied behind his back, and two of the others were walking beside him.

There was sufficient light for the spy to observe this much, but he could not tell who any of the men were, even had he known them.

On they came, until they were right at the abutment of the bridge, and there, strange to say, they all disappeared.

Luke could hardly believe the evidence of his own eyes. Where had the men gone to so suddenly? Here was a mystery with a vengeance.

Waiting for some time to see if they would not reappear, and finding that they did not, the young engineer left his place and crept carefully down to the point where he had last seen them.

They were not to be seen now, and he failed to find any place where they had turned aside into another course. In truth there was no other course open to them, for they had walked right up to the solid abutment.

Where could they be?

Giving that question up, Luke went back to his first position, and there he settled down to await further developments.

And while he waited a new suspicion dawned upon him, for now and then he heard or fancied he heard, some very peculiar sounds down under the bed of the railroad in the heart of the bank.

Some time passed, and then another train was heard coming.

Luke glanced at his watch. "This must be Dan Fielding returning," he reasoned, knowing that no other train was due there at that hour.

Presently the train came in sight at the top of the grade, and with a wild shriek of the whistle it dashed down toward the bridge at lightning speed.

"He is coming at a pretty stiff gait," thought Luke, "and no doubt Dan has told him what I asked him to."

While the young engineer listened and watched he heard a slight noise on the top of the road-bed, and raising himself a little he saw, to his surprise, one of the ties roll over in its place, disclosing a lighted space underneath.

Here was something at last.

Then the bluish light was seen, made evidently by the burning of some sort of prepared powder, and the next moment up came the ghost!

It was certainly a horrible-looking object, for it was made to look like a skeleton, and around it was a white shroud-like garment that gave out suggestions of the grave in no pleasant way.

On came the train, and by the time it reached the place where the ghost was disappearing, it was traveling like a flash of light.

This was a little more than his ghostship had prepared for, for the engine struck it and the whole thing was snatched out of the hole in a twinkling and sent flying down the bank, while the train dashed right along, the engineer

sounding the brotherhood salutation whistle for Luke's benefit in a most exultant tone.

When the train was well out of sight, Luke saw four men suddenly appear at the point where the five had disappeared some time before, and they scrambled up and over the bank, evidently bent upon recovering their spook.

Luke crouched down as closely as possible, and by good fortune was not seen, and as soon as the men were out of sight he sprang up and ran to the point where they had come from.

There, much to his satisfaction, he found a door right in the solid abutment of the bridge, open, and without waiting an instant to calculate the danger, he entered and looked around for a place of concealment, a spot soon found, for on one side of the den, as we will call it, was piled a lot of rubbish, and Luke dodged behind that.

The road had first been built on a trestle at this point, and when it was filled in with earth the trestle remained there, and now these men had dug out the middle of the bank, boarded up the trestle and made quite a comfortable den of it.

As soon as the young engineer had satisfied himself that he was safe from observation from the other side of the rubbish, he began to look around to see what kind of a place he was in. And the first thing that struck him was that he was in a den of counterfeiters.

And he was not mistaken.

In a few moments the men returned, carrying their ghost with them, and the swearing they indulged in was too "tall" to be calculated.

"We can't stay here another day," declared one. "This ghost has proved our ruin. I was not in favor of any such thing in the first place, and now I hope the rest of you are satisfied."

"How could we know that any such accident as this would happen?" growled another.

"We couldn't, of course; but, as I said it would, this ghost will prove our ruin. In any event, it would be bound to draw attention to this place, and without it we might have remained here forever. It is all up now, though, and the sooner we get away the better for our health."

"There is sense in that," assented a third; "and as soon as the others come we had better make plans for moving, and then no more ghost-foolishness."

So they talked on, and Air-Line Luke was listening to every word, and trying to plan some line of action when, suddenly, he felt a slight jerk at the leg of his trousers from behind!

CHAPTER XV.

AIR-LINE LUKE WINS.

LUCY FIELDING was sitting alone in her cosy little room, sewing, when there came a ring at the bell.

Wondering who the caller could be, she took up the lamp and went to the door.

It proved to be a man with a message.

"Father is not at home," said Lucy, thinking of course that the message was for him.

"I think it is for you," the man explained.

"For me?" and in astonishment she looked again, and sure enough it bore her name.

"Where do you bring it from?" she asked.

"From th' station, miss?"

Wondering what it could be, Lucy tore it open to learn.

The moment she caught sight of its contents her face paled, and she read it through with trembling hands.

It read as follows:

"LUCY FIELDING:—Come at once to the station. I have been hurt, but not seriously. Do not be alarmed. You had better not tell mother, but come at once."
LUKE JACKSON.

Needless to say, the poor girl was badly frightened, for she reasoned that her lover must be hurt badly, or he would never send such a message.

"I will be there as soon as I can," she said.

"Have you seen him?"

"Yes, ma'm," was the lying reply.

"And is he badly hurt?"

"Well, yes; purty bad, ma'm."

"But he will not die, will he?" in great anxiety.

"No, I reckon not," was the answer. "But mebbey you had better not lose any time in gettin' there, ma'm. You kin come right along with me, if ye will."

"Yes. Wait one moment, and I will be ready."

Back into the house she flew for something to put on her head, and then she was ready and set out with the man at once.

Little did she think of the trap she was walking into.

When they were about half-way to the station, and just as they were about to pass a carriage that stood near the sidewalk, the man suddenly turned and grabbed Lucy in his arms, and before she could utter a cry she was thrust into the carriage where other arms were ready to receive her.

And it was all done so quickly that no one could have interfered; and as soon as the girl was placed within, and the man had sprung up to the driver's seat, the carriage was driven rapidly away.

Lucy was so badly frightened that she could hardly realize what had happened; but she was soon brought to realize it all in a most forcible manner.

As soon as the man in whose power she was spoke, she recognized his voice.

It was Stewart Lyman!

"Well, my dear," he said, "you see you are in my power, and I do not mean to let you out of it again. This night we will go far from here, you shall become my wife, and this place shall never see either of us again."

Lucy tried to cry out for help, but the man held his hand over her mouth so that she could not do so.

"No use your kicking," he said, "for I do not mean to let you get out of my hands, now that I have got hold of you. You will go with me to a neat little place of hiding that I happen to know of, and then, as soon as I can arrange it, we will travel. I have it all mapped out, and we will spend our honeymoon in some other country."

Lucy struggled hard to free herself from his grasp, but could not do so, and the carriage rolled rapidly out of the city and away into the open country.

When Air-Line Luke felt the tug at the leg of his trousers, he thought at first that it must be a dog, and looked quickly down.

And what he saw surprised him not a little!—it was a human hand that had hold of him!

Luke knew better than to make any sound that would make his presence known, and the one who had hold of him evidently desired him to observe perfect silence, for he gave two or three more gentle jerks at his leg.

There was but little light behind the heap of rubbish, and in order to learn who it was that had hold of him the young engineer had to stoop down.

When he did this, he found a man lying there on the hard floor of the den, his hands and feet bound and a gag in his mouth.

Luke had to look close to get a view of the face, but the moment he did get a fair look at it, an exclamation of surprise almost escaped him.

The man was Hooper, the detective!

Taking good care not to make any noise, the young engineer drew his knife and severed the cords that held his friend, and removed the gag from his mouth; then the two began a whispered conversation.

Each explained to the other how he had come there.

"Are you armed?" the detective asked.

"Yes," answered Luke; "are you?"

"No; they took my weapons away from me when they got hold of me, and I am as good as helpless."

"Perhaps if you feel around you can find something that will answer as a hand-to-hand weapon," suggested Luke.

Both were now standing up, and the detective looked around the place.

"Say," he presently whispered to Luke, "there is a coat hanging up there in reach of you; just watch your chance and slip your hand into it and see what there is in it. It is possible that there is a weapon in one of the pockets."

Luke waited for the opportunity, and then did as directed, and much to their delight, the detective's own revolvers were recovered.

They were now ready for business, and it looked as though it would go hard with the counterfeiters.

In the mean time the counterfeiters had been talking steadily and excitedly, and were laying their plans for removing their den to some other place.

Before they could act, however, they had to await the arrival of more of their band, who were expected at any moment. Then it was their intention to cast the detective into the river with a weight at his feet and thus dispose

of him. This done, they would lose no time in getting away.

The detective and the young engineer quickly decided to make their attack at once before the others came, and were just preparing to do so when there came a signal at the door and one of the men went to open it.

"Too late now," whispered the detective; "we will have to wait until they all get to talking again. No doubt this is the rest of their band."

When the new-comers entered the young engineer could hardly remain quiet. Never had he received a greater shock. Never had he felt a stronger desire to drive a bullet into a fellow-being.

A word will explain.

The persons who came in were—Stewart Lyman and a villainous-looking companion, and between them they supported the senseless form of pretty Lucy Fielding.

The detective took in the situation at a glance, for Luke had told him nearly the whole of the affair back of the attempt at train-wrecking, and he laid his hand upon the young engineer's arm to restrain him.

"Wait a minute," he whispered, "and we will go for them."

"Pull that chair up here," ordered the cashier, "so we can set this girl down."

One of the men sprung to obey, and the girl was placed into it, the arms of the chair keeping her from falling.

"What did you bring that girl here for?" demanded one of the men. "We will have all we can do to take care of ourselves, I am thinking."

"Why, what has happened?" asked the cashier.

"Nothing, only this ghost-foolishness of yours has got us into trouble," was the retort.

"How is that?"

"Why, a train came along awhile ago and snatched it out of the hole, and no doubt there will be some one here to-morrow to find out where it came from."

"Well, let them come," the cashier laughed.

"They won't find us here, for I mean to get away to-night. We will divide the spoils and disband at once. Then I shall start down the river with this girl and escape with her out of the country."

This started a lively debate—the villains all standing together, talking earnestly and excitedly, when—

"Hands up! every one of you! or you are dead men!"

Quick as a flash they turned, and found themselves face to face with Air-Line Luke and the detective, and three gleaming revolvers were looking straight into their eyes.

"Hands up!" the detective repeated, "or down you go!"

Two or three obeyed the command, but not so the others.

"Never!" they cried, but as they reached for their weapons, the revolvers of the detective spoke and three of them fell to the floor.

It was life or death to the two young men, and the resolute Hooper did not hesitate to act promptly; he shot to kill.

One of the men to fall was the cashier.

The others held up their hands, and while the detective held them under the cover of his weapons the young engineer deftly bound their hands and feet.

In a brief while it was all over, and Air-Line Luke turned his attention to Lucy, who was just coming out of her faint.

Lucy came to with a scream of fright, but, when she saw her lover bending over her it quickly changed to one of joy, and, woman-like she fainted again!

"What shall we do now?" the detective inquired. "One of us will have to go to the town for help, I guess."

"I can do better than that, I think," answered Luke, glancing at his watch; "a train will be along in a few minutes and I will stop it here. Then with the help of the trainmen we can secure these vermin and go on to West Plain at once."

So it was arranged. In a short time the train came, and in a little while the report of the capture was flashed over the wires from the West Plain Station.

CHAPTER XVI.

CONCLUDING WORDS.

THE ghost at the bridge was never seen again. And it proved to be a thing made of wire and rubber, painted to look like a skeleton, and covered with a white robe.

Only for their ghost, the counterfeiters might have gone on for a long time, for had not Air-

Line Luke gone there that night, the detective would never have seen another day.

As it was, it all came out well.

One of the counterfeiters proved to be an ex-detective, and one who had at one time stood high in esteem, and it was to him that Detective Hooper owed his defeat. But, that defeat resulted in victory when the young engineer took a hand in the game.

And as for the forgeries—they were all the work of Stewart Lyman. That shrewd scoundrel had been carrying on his work for some time, going from bad to worse, until at last it ended in forgery, counterfeiting, and death.

Needless to say, both the detective and Air-Line Luke were highly complimented and rewarded.

Luke and Lucy were married, and no further troubles have come to mar their peace. Lucy is a model wife and mother, is loved by all who know her.

Luke's mother is still living, and with her is Ettie Hogan, who is receiving a good education, and promises to grow up to be a good and useful woman.

"Doc" Howard, Dan Fielding, and others whose names have been mentioned, are still on the road, and all admire Air-Line Luke, and are looking forward to his promotion to a higher office than the one in which we leave him. Indeed, there are rumors that he is soon to become assistant superintendent of the line.

The dead counterfeiters were buried, with little honor, and the living ones were punished to the full extent of the law—as they richly deserved.

So it always is in the long run. Sooner or later an evil life finds an evil end. It does not pay to do wrong; it never has paid and it never will pay. But the reward for honesty and a brave discharge of duty is certain—as certain as it was in the case of Air-Line Luke, the young detective engineer.

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